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A review of the practice and legacy of Australian planning pioneer Margaret Feilman

Amanda Davies a and Julie Brunnerb

aSchool of the Built Environment, Curtin University, Perth, Australia; bOUA Programs, Curtin University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

Dr Margaret Anne Feilman (OBE) (1921–2013) was one of Western Australia’s most notable and influential planners. With qualifications in architecture and planning, she pioneered an approach to town design that integrated the built form with the natural environment. Her work resulted in, inter alia, the establishment of innovative residential neighbourhoods across Western Australia. Over her 34 year professional career she subscribed to many of the philosophies of the New Town Movement, but also recognised the need to adapt British planning solutions to the Australian social, economic and environmental context. She was an advocate of individualised and situational planning and of incorporating community values and concerns. She also fiercely argued that planning schemes needed to be realistic in their scope and take account of the resources and needs of communities.

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Margaret Feilman; new town; garden city; planning pioneer; Australian planning history; woman planner

1. Introduction

Dr Margaret Feilman OBE has been described as many things: a gift, a trailblazer, a force in heritage conservation who made an outstanding contribution to architecture and town planning. Qualities of courage, passion, creativity, stubbornness and a string of firsts are associated with her name. (Pickering 2014, 20)

Dr Margaret Anne Feilman (OBE) (1921–2013) was the first practicing planner in Western Australia (WA) to hold a professional planning qualification (Davies 2003; Ethell 2013). She was also the first female to own and operate her own planning consultancy. In 1995, Robert Freestone wrote that she was ‘the most distinguished Australian women planner’ (271). Her career achievements include being appointed the first female architectural cadet in the Public Works Department in 1938, being a founding member of the National Trust of Australia (WA) and in 1984 being appointed the Chairman of Town Planning Board of WA (Pickering 2014). Her contributions to planning and architecture were recognised with an OBE (The London Gazette, June 12, 1981), the first honorary Doctor of Architecture from The University of WA, a life fellowship of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, a Paul Harris Fellow of Rotary International, a fellowship of the Royal Australian Planning Institute (1982) and an honorary life membership with the National Trust of Australia.

Margaret Feilman’s story is significant because her innovative approach to town design challenged established town-planning practices. It is also significant because she took a leading role in urban and regional planning in WA at a time when the career opportunities for women in the sector were very limited. This paper reviews Margaret Feilman’s approach to planning and how she established herself as a leading planner of the time, working in her own architectural and planning consultancy. Her work involved planning new suburbs and also developing planning schemes for existing suburbs. Feilman’s catalogue of work and associated correspondence reveals that she subscribed to many of the philosophies of the New Town Movement and specifically utilised many of the design principles of Howard’s Garden City model with attention given to integrated green spaces, the use of green belts, the centralisation of public buildings and local employment and the use of hierarchical road networks to support community identity. It also reveals that Margaret had firm beliefs about the role planners should have in improving environments and livelihoods and that she did not shy away from advocating for her beliefs. Margaret’s approach to her work was heavily influenced by her enduring passion for improving the conditions for women and children, conservation of the natural environment and preservation of heritage landscapes.

This paper draws on interviews the authors conducted with Margaret Feilman. Davies conducted an in-depth interview in November 2001. The interview lasted just over three hours and was conducted at Margaret’s home in Crawley, WA. The interview was unstructured and was focused on eliciting Margaret’s perspectives on her contribution to planning and heritage preservation in WA. Two shorter follow-up
interviews were conducted in the months following the in-depth interview.\(^1\) Brunner conducted an interview with Margaret Feilman in 2008 and also arranged for Margaret to present a lecture to Curtin University. The authors conducted informal interviews with individuals who worked directly with Margaret. This paper also makes use of the Margaret Feilman Papers, a large collection of Feilman’s own records from her time practicing as a planner, which were archived at the Battye Library. The collection includes Margaret’s work completed as a student at Perth Technical College and the University of Durham, correspondence and diaries detailing her activities related to preparing plans for various metropolitan and regional areas, plans drawn by Margaret and newspaper clippings.

This paper is structured into five sections. Following this introductory section, the paper outlines Margaret Feilman’s education and milestones in the early part of her career. The third section provides a review of Margaret’s approach to planning, highlighting how this was heavily influenced by her education and life experiences. The fourth section provides insight into her life as a planner, drawing attention to some challenges she faced as a female working in a male dominated sector and how she worked to secure clients. The paper concludes with a reflection on Margaret’s legacy to the built environment in WA, the practice of planning and the WA community more broadly.

2. Education and early career

Margaret Anne Feilman was born in WA in 1921 and began her education at Kelmscott Primary (South Western Advertiser, December 20, 1951, 7). She attended Perth College, one of WA’s most prestigious girls schools, on a scholarship and graduated with honours a year early (Ethell 2013). Margaret intended to study law, but only being 16 years of age she was considered too young to attend University. Margaret looked for training opportunities and her interests in the environment, both natural and built, and her drawing abilities attracted her to architecture (Matthews 2009). In 1937, Margaret obtained a competitive seven-year architectural cadetship with the WA Government’s Public Works Department. Margaret was the first female awarded such a position with the Department (Pickering 2014). When asked about her time at the Department, Margaret commented that she had learnt a lot, but that she often worked long hours. She was provided with similar work tasks to her male counterparts and did not feel she was denied any opportunities because of her gender. However, she noted that she was only paid 75% of what her male colleagues were paid and she did not feel this was justified.

Whilst negotiating the demands of the cadetship, in 1943 Margaret completed a Bachelor of Arts with majors in history and economics at The University of WA. Then, in 1945, she completed her architectural board exams. Upon finishing her cadetship, qualified as an architect, Margaret was not able to secure the employment she desired in Perth. While women had been employed as architects in Australia since the early 1900s, in WA at that time very few women were employed in any professional position. Margaret moved to Brisbane to take up a junior position with the Brisbane City Council. In that position she was required to draw detailed architectural plans, including for the internal furnishings of the town hall. After 18 months in Brisbane she moved to Melbourne to work in a private architectural practice. Her moves, Margaret said, were prompted by her desire to find interesting and meaningful employment in a comfortable work environment.

While in Melbourne, Margaret was attracted by the offer of a challenging position with the Commonwealth Department of Works and Housing where she worked on the planning and rebuilding of towns devastated by World War Two (particularly in Darwin and coastal towns in Papua New Guinea) (for further information on the town planning of Darwin see Gibson 1997). While working on these rebuilding projects, Margaret gained her first practical experience in town planning. During this time Margaret witnessed that through her work she could make tangible improvements to the lives of many people but particularly women and children from working class or lower socio-economic backgrounds through Planning. She quickly moved to further develop her planning skills and in 1947 she applied for and was awarded a prestigious two-year British Council Scholarship to study at a British university (The West Australian, July 7, 1948, 3).

Margaret purposefully enrolled in the Graduate Diploma in Town and Country Planning at Durham for the duration of her British Council Scholarship. She believed the course at Durham offered a broad-based approach that incorporated both metropolitan and non-metropolitan environments and that this course would equip her with the skills and knowledge for practicing in Australia.\(^2\) Margaret’s course drew heavily on the works of Patrick Geddes. Geddes’ held that a regional approach was required for planning that could move beyond the myopic approach of specialisms. Through his work, Geddes’ demonstrated the importance of the physical geography of places to the human activities within them. Geddes also set out a clear reasoning and method for undertaking a ‘civic survey’ prior to engaging in town planning. Geddes argued those responsible for planning building and infrastructure works needed a holistic understanding of social, economic and environmental issues and capacities before trying to address these.

In 1950, Margaret was awarded her Graduate Diploma in Town and Country Planning with honours
and was admitted as an Associate Member of the Town Planning Institute in London. She then returned to Perth and applied for several town-planning positions. Despite her considerable qualifications and experience, Margaret was not interviewed for any of the positions she applied for. This was indicative to some degree of the times where women’s participation in the workplace was limited and restricted to certain roles. Margaret resolved that her best option was to start her own private practice (Ethell 2013). Margaret A. Feilman Architect and Town Planner opened in 1950; Margaret was aged 29 years. The practice offered both architectural and town and country planning services. Based in a modest one-room office, Margaret took a few years to build a profile and to establish a continuous flow of work.

While Margaret’s practice took time to develop, her profile as a speaker knowledgeable about matters to do with British town and country planning issues and contemporary planning approaches grew quickly. She gave the opening address for the inaugural meeting of the Western Australian division of the Royal Australian Planning Institute. In an article reporting on the meeting titled Interest in lecture by woman town planner, Margaret was described as ‘A young West Australian woman architect who recently returned from abroad with a string of qualifications in town planning’ (The West Australian, August 23, 1950, 7). The event attracted many of Perth’s leading architects, engineers, surveyors, councillors and executive officers of local governing bodies. During the lecture Margaret provided a clear statement about the approach she intended to bring to planning in WA commenting,

The aim now was to make houses fit the population and not the population to fit into housing that was available. Emphasising that long-range planning was essential for national welfare, she said that big cities had swallowed up some of the best and most fertile land for agriculture and bad planning had created stupendous traffic problems. (The West Australian, August 23, 1950, 7)

She drew on examples from England to illustrate her arguments and focused attention on the benefits that housing could bring to the health and welfare of women and children in particular (The West Australian, August 23, 1950).

Margaret’s first planning commission came because of her presentation for the Royal Australian Planning Institute. An audience member, impressed with Margaret’s knowledge, employed her to assess an area of land to the south of the city of Perth (Jandakot) and to make a recommendation on how it should be developed. The project lasted three months and involved detailed mapping exercises (Davies 2003). Margaret commented that the project enabled her to establish her practice’s reputation and she soon secured commissions from the Western Australian Government. Margaret’s profile in her profession grew, along with her business, not so much by the buildings she designed or for the communities she planned for but really for her advocacy of town planning, certainly in the early years.

The establishment of Margaret’s practice in WA was timely, as interest in planning was increasing. In 1952, the government of the day commissioned Gordon Stephenson together with Alistair Hepburn (the then Town Planning Commissioner) to prepare a plan for Perth and Fremantle. This plan released in 1955, and a metropolitan region town-planning scheme was gazetted in 1959. This set the framework for planning in Perth on a larger scale which then required the detailed planning at a local scale to be completed. The Stephenson Hepburn Plan did not provide any planning framework for areas outside of the Perth Metropolitan area. It was in these two capacities where Margaret’s services were ultimately concentrated.

3. Approach to planning

I rise today to acknowledge the passing of Margaret Feilman, Perth’s first female town planner, who was highly regarded in the Perth community and particularly by the planning alumni. Dr Margaret Anne Feilman, OBE, forged a successful career as a planner, architect and landscape designer. I am aware that Dr Feilman is widely acclaimed for her role in planning the area of Kwinana. (Day, Minister for Planning, 2013)

Throughout Margaret’s planning career her work remained closely aligned to the philosophies and approaches she was introduced to at Durham. While at Durham, Margaret designed planning schemes for four localities: Morpeth, a town in Northumberland and roughly a one hour commute from Newcastle upon Tyne; Whickham, a town in North East England and within commuting distance of Newcastle upon Tyne; Wylam, a small village in North East England also and within commuting distance of Newcastle upon Tyne, and; Gosford West as small village which since 1974 has been part of the City of Newcastle upon Tyne. Using the methods set out by Geddes, Margaret carefully documented existing land uses and the social and economic activities of each community and then drafted an ideal layout for each community. Core to Margaret’s designs was creating a clearly zoned and centralised retail and commercial precinct for each town. This was to be separated from residential areas by parklands and civic buildings. Margaret positioned civic buildings to create a buffer between commercial and residential, but also to ensure these areas were well connected, and that civic buildings were easily accessible to all residents.

Margaret paid a great deal of attention to ensuring different landuses were well connected through parklands, road and footpath infrastructure. Her plan for
Wylam showed curvilinear streets and hierarchical traffic circulation to create neighbourhoods – an approach that became a ‘trade mark’ of Margaret’s designs and one adopted into common practice in planning in Australia (Melotte 1997). Her Wylam design also shows her concern with ensuring integrated neighbourhoods and her view that a way of achieving this through positioning housing at the front of lots, with throughways connecting lots to the rear, a modification on the Radburn-type approach. Margaret recognised a need for purpose built residential apartments for older people and positioned these so they would be integrated into residential neighbourhoods, easily accessible and connected to parklands and civic spaces.

Margaret’s first major commission came in 1951 when she was awarded the job of designing a new suburb – called the Mirrabooka Project. The Mirrabooka Project was for a new city to be established 10 km north of Perth city to accommodate 16,000 dwellings. The land development was promoted as part of a solution to cater for WA’s rapidly growing post-war population. This rapid population growth, together with increased government assistance to industry and mineral exploration had dramatically increased demand for housing and industrial land in Perth (Gregory 2012).

Margaret’s design for the Mirrabooka Project promoted a satellite city – with localised recreational, commercial and employment options. Margaret had become very familiar with satellite cities during her time at Durham. During her interview in 2001 with Davies, Margaret noted, specifically, that she has been exposed to Ebenezer Howard’s designs/theory for satellite cities, and was very familiar with his Garden City model and particularly Welwyn Garden City. Moreover, she was exposed to the discussions about implementing Howard’s ideas that gave rise to the New Towns Movement. The New Town approach placed the satellite city/suburb into a broader and more comprehensive planning framework where, whilst the majority of day-to-day activities were to be catered for within the satellite city/suburb, connection to the region’s central business district was viewed as critical. The New Town approach recognised the semi-dependent nature of the satellite city/suburb on the broader region and became heavily favoured by Margaret across her designs.

Following her work on Mirrabooka, Margaret was employed to design the Town of Kwinana – with the brief again to create housing for Perth’s growing population. MacLachlan and Horsley (2015, 117) wrote that ‘Margaret Feilman’s appointment as the consultant planner for Kwinana was a remarkably bold step, given the dominantly masculine and arguably patriarchal character of the Australian planning community at that time.’ They further wrote that ‘women had been systematically excluded from all significant state planning activities prior to World War II’.

Kwinana, also to be planned satellite community, was to be located 30 km from the Perth CBD, and some 7500 acres was set aside to provide houses for 25,000 people. Kwinana was originally envisaged as operating as a dormitory suburb for the rapidly establishing oil refinery located 30 km south of Perth (Walker 2000). However, as with Mirrabooka, Margaret utilised the major tenets of the New Town model in her design for Kwinana (Brown 2007). She also drew heavily on the approach promoted by Geddes, which encouraged close observation and the use of the civic survey before deciding on the particulars of a design. As such, Margaret ‘traipsed all over the ridges and bush’ areas of Kwinana seeking to familiarise herself with the local area (Margaret Feilman personal communication 2001).

Through her initial ‘traipsing’ of the site, Margaret recognised that much of the area initially identified for the Kwinana development was not physically suitable for housing. She wrote to advise the Minister of Works about her findings and suggested that an area to the south of the initially reserved land would be more suitable. She also strongly recommended the development be built further south than originally intended so the town site would not be adversely exposed to the industrial fumes of the developing oil refinery operations (Ethell 2013).

On the matter, The West Australian (April 29, 1953, 2) reported,

The new Kwinana township will be planned to provide for a population of 40,000 people … Mr Tonkin said that the town planning consultant to the State Government (Professor Gordon Stephenson) had recommended the planning of the town for 40,000 people and extension northwards. However, members of the Cabinet felt that the contours of the land to the north of Medina [one of the four suburbs of the Kwinana townsite] presented town-planning difficulties not present in the south … Mr Tonkin, who was chairman of a Cabinet sub-committee which inquired into the development of Kwinana, said that Miss Margaret Feilman with the Town Planning board would draw up the plans for the new area.

Through her work on Kwinana, Margaret created a town site where roads were placed in hierarchical arrangements. Margaret did not support the grid pattern approach to street design and her subdivisional layout followed the natural contours of the land. Her hierarchical approach to road design, where she assigned functionality to roadways based on the nature and volume of traffic continues to be used in planning today and is evident throughout much of the Perth Metropolitan Region. MacLachlan and Horsley (2015, 119) note that the street design pattern in the 1955 Plan by Stephenson and Hepburn was ‘remarkably
similar to the pattern inaugurated by Feilman in Medina’ and ‘tested several years before 1955’.

It was, however, through paying careful attention to the natural landscape Margaret was able to incorporate measures to protect the features of the natural environment in her plans. This stewardship to protection of the natural landscape occurred before there were any established organisations protecting native bushland (MacLachlan and Horsley 2015, 125). Indeed, the careful road design for Kwinana was not simply to promote a hierarchical road network, she used it as a measure to create reserves of large tracts of bushland surrounding the town which provide a buffer between the town site and industry (Grubb 2008). She was cautious in her road design to ensure that, where possible, trees were left in private domains and public spaces. Indeed, during her interview with Brunner in 2008, Margaret told of riding on a bulldozer, pointing out to the driver during her interview with Brunner in 2008, Margaret told of riding on a bulldozer, pointing out to the driver all the trees to be avoided during site clearing. Grubb (2008, 7) wrote of Kwinana that ‘50 years on our bush parks are a natural treasure, a legacy of Margaret’s vision’.

When Kwinana was opened in 1956 it was done so in grand style with the Australasian Petroleum Refinery Ltd. flying 29 journalists to WA for the opening event. The event was reported in The West Australian,

The town planner of these suburbs of a future industrial city, Miss Margaret Feilman explained the modern lines of their development on a contour model. The visitors were told that Medina would ultimately house about 5,000 people and Calista about 3,500. Other suburbs would be added as new Kwinana industries were established. (The West Australian, November 22, 1956, 4)

Of Margaret’s work on Kwinana, Freestone (2010, 152) wrote,

This was the first comprehensive adaption of the British New Town model in the very different setting of Western Australia.

Margaret has been praised by many for the attention she gave to the physical capacities of the land and her commitment to use urban design to improve the lives of residents. Her medium density housing concepts throughout the Kwinana New Town were pioneering in Australian Planning (Melotte 1997).

By the mid-1950s, Margaret had completed several major planning schemes and had established a reputation in Perth as an innovative planner. In 1956, she explained her approach to planning in a public lecture emphasising that planning had to be sensitive to the physical characteristics of the land and also the social and economic circumstances of the residents. A report on her public lecture reported her saying,

Town Planning was based on the use of a given area of land by as many people as possible. This involved consideration of the best physical environment in which the people could live, work and have their recreation. Two aspects which could not be ignored were the actual land itself, that is, the land available for living in; the grades of hills, as to whether or not they are suitable for roads; and similar related matters, and also the economics of planning, that is what is reasonably practicable. We should forget plans which have no relation to the economics of people. It is useless to plan something which it would be financially-impossible to complete. (Narrogin Observer, May 21, 1954, 1)

She emphasised the role of planners in developing future scenarios for an area and then using land development controls to promote desired activities,

Planning really puts in visible form the needs of an area and forecasts where that area will grow. It is a target and affords the basis and programme for the town. It should not be a luxury imposed from on top. (Narrogin Observer, May 21, 1954, 1)

Margaret also stressed that the most important issues to be addressed through a town plan should be improving the lives of the residents of an area, and particularly children,

The diversion of arterial roads so that they did not go through residential areas and endanger children, [the] convenience of housing to such things as shops and recreation areas, and amenity, which means the maximum possible use of a given area. It means providing a pleasant outlook for residential areas, provision of adequate open spaces and location of factories so that no smoke or fumes can annoy householders, [and] a particularly important long range aspect was to attract industry so that the children growing up will be able to secure employment in their own town and not have to go to the city to work. (Narrogin Observer, May 21, 1954, 1)

Margaret’s environmentally, economic and socially deterministic planning approach had been influenced by some of the greatest planners of the time. With her own fierce interest in the welfare of women and children (News Adelaide, August 16, 1954) and her visual skills and observational methodology she developed her own particular planning philosophy which resulted in many lasting changes to the way planning occurred particularly in WA but also in other places in Australia.

4. Life working as a planner

Margaret contributed to the development of town planning as a new profession in post war Australia, initially with an invited address on current town planning issues at the launch of the then Australian Planning Institute in September 1950. Margaret gave a number of formal presentations advocating town planning during these early years of her practise, yet, when the membership list was approved for the new Australian Planning Institute; she was not included. (Melotte and Newman 2013)
Margaret was an educated and independent woman, who, in pursuing her desire to improve the health, well-being and prospects of lower socio-economic families, pursued a career in a male dominated profession. While she achieved considerable success and recognition, particularly later in her career, she experienced gender discrimination throughout. In an interview conducted with Margaret in 1955 she stated that despite her success, she would hesitate to recommend her career path to other girls. She explained it was a demanding job in terms of both hours and energy, and she thought there were most likely other careers which were just as satisfying and worthwhile that would leave time for a personal and social life. Long days restricted her pursuit of hiking, surfing, the visual arts, reading, gardening and travelling, although she was able to serve on the committee of the Art Gallery Society of WA and did so for 10 years (Ethell 2013).

Given the conditions of the day, Margaret commented that some clients expected her fees to be discounted because of her being female. She did not share this view and charged for her services accordingly. When she encountered gender discrimination she was not deterred, and, with time established a space for herself where she could practice planning as she wanted. Trosic (2016), who interviewed Margaret, commented that she said that she would not take no as an answer, and that if something made planning sense, it also made common sense, and had to be fought for. The following section reviews how Margaret developed a client base and how she developed planning schemes for clients. The section is divided into two parts, with the first part focusing on her approach to securing work and the second on her approach to completing the works.

4.1. Approach to securing work
Margaret secured several commissions from the WA government in the early years of her practice designing new suburbs for Perth. These projects were awarded on a competitive merit basis. While she received much acclaim for this work, she could not establish a reliable flow of work from the Government for projects in the metropolitan region. This was principally because as recognition of the value of town planning grew (largely because of the public presentations given by Margaret) the state government increased its in-house capacity for planning, reducing the need for consultants. However, in shifting her focus to regional WA, Margaret could attract a considerable portfolio of work from the State Government and country local governments and Roads Boards. In this era, and for many years to come, there did not exist a planning framework outside of the Perth Metropolitan area. Margaret however worked hard to bring the principles of good planning design to many regional townships.

On establishing her practice Margaret rapidly identified that planning, as she now viewed it, was not well understood. To secure work she realised she needed to first educate people about the value of town and country planning. Margaret did this through delivering many public lectures. Figure 1 shows Margaret’s speaking notes for a presentation she gave to the Margaret River community in September 1953. From Figure 1 it can be seen that Margaret’s talking points were that planning can lead to ‘more economical development’, ‘greater community convenience and efficiency’ and a ‘better environment’.

Between 1950 and 1954 Margaret travelled throughout the Wheatbelt, South West and Great Southern areas of WA delivering lectures. As she presented her lectures she promoted her own services and avenues for financial support available from the State Government to fund planning schemes. This direct approach proved successful, with Margaret securing many clients throughout regional WA – as shown in Table 1.

Providing insight into Margaret’s direct approach for securing new clients is an account of a presentation she gave to the local Chamber of Commerce in Narrogin (a small town in the southern wheatbelt area of WA).

[Margaret] quickly won the attention of her audience by her knowledge of the subject [Town Planning] coupled with clearness of expression and pleasant manner. When asked what the cost would be to have a plan of existing land uses made Miss Feilman replied that the cost if done privately, would be several hundred pounds, but the State Government in recent months had materially assisted this work in the course of its normal surveys and if the Council made representations in the directions Miss Feilman outlined, the necessary plans could ultimately he obtained for the matter of a few shillings. This had already happened in the case of Waroona, Busselton and Margaret River. (Narrogin Observer, May 21, 1954, 1)

A short time after Margaret’s presentation she received a letter from the Council asking her to set out her proposed scope of work and terms for developing a planning scheme for Narrogin.

A review of Margaret’s correspondence with the Margaret River Roads Board (MMRB) provides further insight into her approach to securing clients. On 18 May 1953, the secretary of the MRRB Mr Harland wrote to Margaret requesting her to address the residents of the area about town planning. The letter read, It is felt that both this town and Augusta have natural beauty which warrants close attention to town planning and my Board would be greatly appreciative if you could assist in this regard. (Mr Harland, 18 May 1953 in Margaret Feilman Papers)

Margaret responded advising that she would present a lecture to the community. While the Roads Board offered to arrange her transport and accommodation,
Margaret stated that she would make her own arrangements and contact them to let them know when she was coming. Following Margaret’s visit to the MMRB in September 1953, Mr Harland wrote to Margaret asking her to,

Kindly submit a rough outline of what you consider preliminary essentials towards a town planning scheme for Margaret River and Augusta and what terms of engagement would be acceptable to you.

(Mr Harland, 14 November 1953 in Margaret Feilman Papers)

Margaret responded,

I am in the process of … drafting a letter to give as clear an outline as possible to your Board of what is entailed in preparing Planning Schemes for the

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**Figure 1.** Margaret Feilman’s speaking notes for a community meeting in Margaret River, Western Australia. Source: State Library of Western Australia, MN 2578.

**Table 1.** Towns and cities for which Margaret prepared town plans.

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<tr>
<th>Towns in Metropolitan Perth</th>
<th>Towns in the Wheatbelt, Great Southern and South West Regions</th>
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<td>Belmont</td>
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<td>Melville</td>
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<td>Subiaco</td>
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<td>Towns in the Wheatbelt, Great Southern and South West Regions</td>
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<td>Albany</td>
<td>Augusta-Margaret River</td>
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<td>Kojonup</td>
<td>Northam</td>
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<td>Beachlands</td>
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Source: State Library of Western Australia, MN 2578.
towns of Margaret River and Augusta. I shall certainly see that you have this data well before December 12th. I am about to leave for Esperance for 3 ½ days and will complete it on my return. (Ms Feilman, 25 November 1953 in Margaret Feilman Papers)

On the 10th December Margaret sent a three-page letter to the MMRB setting out what a Planning Scheme entailed, what information would be required and the costs.

Margaret knew that financial resources of Roads Boards were limited, and most often directed to infrastructure projects. In Davies’ in-depth interview with Margaret she explained that convincing clients to invest money in planning and, in her firm required her to be flexible to the needs of the community, while also clarifying the value of her work and her commitment. Margaret’s dealings with the MMRB provide a good insight into her approach. In addressing the MMRB on the matter, Margaret wrote,

As far as the total costs of the Scheme is concerned I can only give you a very rough estimate as I find the only accurate method with this type of work is to assess fees on a time basis. However I think that for Margaret River the cost of the outline plan apart from special detail should be well under £500. I suggest to your Secretary that the most satisfactory way for both parties is to assess fees on time occupied i.e., actual wages per hour plus a small percentage to cover office overhead. … I would suggest that the Board give some indication of what they can afford to spend on planning in any given year. This method is being adopted by other Local Authorities, and seems to work well. (Ms Feilman, 10 December 1953 in Margaret Feilman Papers)

Interestingly, Margaret also provided the MMRB with considerable detail about how costs could be reduced stating that ’The detailed categorising (sic) for the plan could be carried out locally with the help of town members or other responsible interested citizens’ (in Margaret Feilman Papers). Further, to demonstrate that she could deliver good value to the MMRB, she mentioned that she had already lobbied the State Government for aerial surveying to be undertaken of both Margaret River and Augusta at a cost to the State and that she had already written to the Forestry Department regarding possible plantings for improving the street scapes.

Margaret, when committed to a project, gave her all and investigated every pathway possible to achieve the desired outcome that would have the broadest possible impact. One colleague of Margaret’s, in reflecting on her approach to securing work stated:

you know she was a hard woman, difficult to deal with at times and not always nice. Even in her own words she told people she did not take no as an answer if she thought the desired outcome was the right one. (Trosic 2016)

Tom Perrigo (in Pickering 2014, 21) stated ‘She took great delight in mapping out a plan to “beat” the system. It just highlights her incredible mind and how determined she was.’

4.2. Approach to completing the work

As previously outlined, Margaret’s philosophy for planning was heavily influenced by her time at of Durham. Throughout her planning career, she took great care to assemble as much information about the physical capacities of the land and the social and economic needs of the community as part of the planning process. During Davies’ in-depth interview Margaret recounted tales of her early days working as planner. She was heavily critical of planning in the Perth metropolitan area which she believed failed to take adequate account of the physical capacities of the land and executed in a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

Throughout her career Margaret held that detailed information about the physical conditions of the site and social and economic circumstances of the community was essential to inform the development of appropriate and effective planning schemes. With town planning in its infancy, many localities did not have topographic maps, records of land uses or aerial photographs. Furthermore, there was no standardisation across the government departments for mapping and measurement techniques. As a result, Margaret would often have to draft her own contour maps and sketch out base land use plans.

When working on plans for established towns, Margaret emphasised the need to take account of each area’s physical capacities and existing social and economic activities. She noted there was a need to,

Find out what is wrong and what is right about the town, and the opinion of the people living in it. This involves finding out what will happen over, the next 20 years in detail and after that period in general. (Narrogin Observer, Friday 21 May 1954, 1)

Margaret’s approach attempted to involve the community in grassroots planning processes. Indeed, Margaret kept detailed records of the correspondence she engaged in during the research period for each plan she prepared. On reviewing some of those files associated with her planning of the Town of Margaret River it was found she sent and received hundreds of letters from community members and representatives. Remarkably her records show she replied to each letter she received. Margaret was meticulous and ordered in her approach to planning starting with the base mapping, collection of information and communicating with community members prior to any plan preparation.

Margaret’s interest in heritage was always a consideration in planning, particularly when developing
schemes for established settlements. It concerned her that new plans for future development sought mostly to clear land (of previous built form and of natural landscape) and ‘begin with a clean slate’. Her resolve that communities needed connection with the past became obvious to her during her time working on the rebuilding of Darwin post World War 2 and through her applied study in the UK. Her commitment to preserving the heritage of landscapes through planning schemes resulted in protecting many heritage landscapes in WA, particularly in country areas of the state. She worked at one time with Gerald Keall (solicitor) to introduce heritage and environmental planning controls to Western Australian town-planning schemes (Ethell 2013) and ‘new Australian techniques and policies for heritage conservation assessment’ (Melotte 1997). Her work with both the National Trust and the Australian Heritage Commission resulted in a number of prominent buildings being preserved both in the city and in smaller country towns in WA, and heritage considerations being explicit in planning processes.

5. Legacy

Put simply, Margaret’s intellect was outstanding and her gift in being able to see the holistic relationship between the built form and landscape of heritage places was rare. People refer to heritage as places and things that are valued enough today to leave for future generations. I cannot stress enough what Margaret did for this State by ensuring throughout her professional life that Western Australia’s unique heritage (historic, natural and Aboriginal) was conserved so that both present and future generations did have the opportunity to appreciate their heritage. I can still remember even in her final days of reasonable health when Margaret was adamant the National Trust ensure the Swan coastal plain and what we refer to as the hills, were protected from inappropriate development. (Tom Perrigo, CEO National Trust of Australia (WA), in Pickering 2014, 21)

Margaret’s work as a town planner left an indelible legacy for the Western Australian public. First and foremost, she set about educating the community about the benefits and opportunities of town planning and she did this at a grassroots level, getting out into communities that may not otherwise have had access to this knowledge. She then made planning affordable for these communities and sought to maintain and inform the physical and cultural heritage of the locations in which she worked. She was committed to finding town-planning strategies that could facilitate community betterment and lobbied to have these incorporated into statutory planning arrangements (particularly regarding the environment and heritage).

Margaret also did not restrict her activities to planning. She helped set up WA’s first natural environment organisation, ‘The Tree Society’ and the state branch of the National Trust. She was involved in the governance of these organisations and others in heritage, planning, aged care and art organisations (Ethell 2013). She was actively involved in supporting women’s issues (particularly education). Her involvement was strongly associated with her belief that human well-being was closely associated with the condition of peoples’ environmental surrounds and her planning schemes gave prominence to schools and public education facilities. With her sister Patricia Feilman, she established the Feilman Foundation in January 1976 a charity to support the education of women and girls. She also donated funds to the University of WA through the Centenary Trust for Women for a supplementary scholarship to support female PhD students undertaking studies on the natural environment of WA.

Margaret was a pioneer of the New Town approach in the Australian context. She drew on the philosophies of the New Town Movement, but adapted the specific operationalisation of these in her planning schemes to respond to the Western Australian social, economic and environmental context. She was passionate that planning could improve the lives all citizens and particularly lower socio-economic groups. She was equally passionate that good planning could only be achieved through first collecting appropriate social, economic and environmental information about the site and then tailoring planning solutions to address the core needs of the community. She took career risks in challenging senior figures involved in planning and argued the case for planning investment for regional WA. As such, Margaret’s legacy extends well beyond being a pioneer of the New Town approach in Australia.

Notes

1. A paper by Davies (2003) reports on some of the data collected through the three interviews with Margaret Feilman.
2. Gavin Walkley CBE also recognized the suitability of the Durham course for the Australian context and based the first undergraduate planning program offered in Australia on the Durham Graduate Diploma (Jones 2003).
3. Margaret kept these plans in her possession and in 2013 they were deposited into an archival collection in the Battye Library.
4. Equivalent to $24,000 in 2016, calculated using the Reserve Bank of Australia’s Pre-Decimal Inflation Calculator.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
ORCID

Amanda Davies https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1892-9128.

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