

Protecting the Adelaide Park Lands: Safeguarding South Australia's Green Heart

A strategic commitment to heritage, health, climate resilience, and community wellbeing through enduring Park Lands protection.

Context and Vision

The Adelaide Park Lands form a 760-hectare public green belt encircling and weaving through the city — a globally unique urban design legacy of Colonel William Light's 1837 plan. Their inclusion on the National Heritage List recognises the Park Lands and City Layout as an outstanding example of integrated town planning, demonstrating a visionary commitment to green space, public amenity, and urban form.

The Park Lands are more than open space. They are cultural landscape, environmental infrastructure, heritage asset, and community resource. They provide a natural cooling system, carbon sink, biodiversity corridors, and high-value recreational and cultural spaces. They contribute to the health, identity, and economic prosperity of Adelaide, strengthening the State's reputation as a green, liveable city on the global stage.

A core principle of the Park Lands' heritage value is their continuity as a single, indivisible landscape. The integrity of the green belt depends upon its wholeness. Fragmentation through zoning, functional carve-outs, or excision alters the fundamental character and purpose of the Park Lands. Preserving continuity is therefore essential to safeguarding both heritage significance and urban performance.

Few cities have access to such an extensive inner-city landscape positioned to support population growth, infill development, climate adaptation, and public wellbeing. Protecting and enhancing the Park Lands will strengthen South Australia's ability to attract global talent, investment, international visitation, and major events.

Despite Australia's failed bid to co-host COP31, Adelaide's Park Lands continues to represent a unique opportunity to demonstrate climate-positive urban leadership. Showcasing a continuous, nature-based cooling and carbon-absorbing landscape at the city's core provides an internationally relevant model of how heritage, climate strategy, health, and urban design can coexist to support a net-zero trajectory.

The vision for the Park Lands must be long-term, evidence-based, and culturally respectful — recognising the Kaurna people as the Traditional Custodians of the Adelaide Plains and supporting their continued cultural connection to, and involvement in, decision-making regarding the care and use of the Park Lands.

Why the Park Lands Matter

The Adelaide Park Lands deliver a range of critical public benefits that extend far beyond recreational value. Their protection is an essential investment in South Australia's health, heritage, climate resilience, economic strength, and cultural identity.

Heritage and Cultural Significance

The Park Lands are the foundational element of Adelaide's city plan, forming a civic and cultural landscape of national heritage value. Recognised on the National Heritage List, they represent Australia's earliest example of a planned green belt and continue to embody Light's vision for a city embedded in nature. Protecting the Park Lands safeguards this legacy for future generations.

The Institute recognises the Kaurna people as the Traditional Custodians of the Adelaide Plains and acknowledges the cultural importance of the Park Lands as living Country. Continued and respectful involvement of Kaurna representatives in decisions regarding the care and cultural use of the Park Lands is fundamental to their ongoing stewardship.

Health and Community Wellbeing

Access to green space is associated with substantial physical and mental health benefits. The Park Lands function as preventative health infrastructure — supporting physical activity, reducing stress and anxiety, enhancing social connection, and improving mental wellbeing. Increasing accessible green open space contributes to long-term reductions in healthcare demand and public health expenditure.

Programs such as Green Adelaide's Nature Prescription initiative provide measurable wellbeing outcomes when people actively connect with natural environments. Embedding such programs as permanent features of the Park Lands would strengthen South Australia's public health strategy and community resilience.

Climate Resilience and Environmental Performance

The Park Lands moderate urban heat, store carbon, improve air quality, and support biodiversity. Their continuous tree canopy cools the city, mitigates the urban heat island effect, and enhances thermal comfort. As climate change intensifies, the Park Lands are essential natural infrastructure for adaptation and resilience.

Maintaining the Park Lands as a continuous landscape amplifies these environmental benefits. Fragmentation or increased building footprint reduces their cooling capacity, habitat connectivity, and carbon storage potential. A holistic protection approach ensures the Park Lands continue to function as Adelaide's climate buffer.

Economic and Social Value

The Park Lands strengthen Adelaide's status as a green, globally competitive capital, underpinning tourism, talent attraction and population growth. While they support a vibrant calendar of national and international events, these must be fundamentally consistent with the

Park Lands' purpose: fully public, green, continuous and free from intrusive or permanent built infrastructure. Events should protect existing mature tree canopy, ensure open access, and avoid developments that erode long-term environmental or cultural values.

In the context of Australia's COP31 bid, a protected Park Lands system enhances Adelaide's capacity to demonstrate leadership in climate-positive planning, nature-based design and heritage-aligned development, strengthening both economic and diplomatic outcomes.

The Institute's Position

The Australian Institute of Architects (SA Chapter) advocates for long-term, design-led stewardship of the Adelaide Park Lands as a single, unified landscape of heritage, cultural, environmental and social value.

The Institute calls for:

- Strong legislative protection that ensures the Park Lands remain publicly accessible, green, and continuous.
- Holistic planning and management that treats the Park Lands as one indivisible ecological and cultural system, not a series of development parcels.
- Design, heritage and evidence-based decision-making to guide future use, enhancement, and public investment.
- Respectful involvement of Kaurna representatives in matters relating to the care and cultural use of the Park Lands.
- Collaborative governance, including partnerships with Green Adelaide and relevant agencies, to achieve long-term environmental and community wellbeing outcomes.

The Institute supports innovation that enhances public benefit, sustainability, accessibility, and climate resilience in the Park Lands, where such interventions uphold their open-space character and heritage significance.

Key Actions for Government

To ensure the enduring protection of the Adelaide Park Lands, the Institute recommends that the South Australian Government:

1. Legislate stronger protection by elevating the Adelaide Park Lands to a State Heritage Place or Area, reinforcing their National Heritage status.
2. Maintain the Park Lands as a single, continuous landscape by rejecting fragmentation, zoning carve-outs, privatisation, or excisions that compromise their integrity.

3. Guarantee public accessibility by prioritising open, green, community-use spaces and limiting built infrastructure to minimal, contextually appropriate facilities that enhance public benefit.
4. Reinstate alienated or Crown-occupied land no longer required for its original purpose back to the Park Lands and remove legislative mechanisms associated with former land use.
5. Support Kaurna involvement in decision-making, ensuring ongoing consultation and cultural oversight for matters relating to the Park Lands.
6. Invest in urban greening and biodiversity through increased canopy cover and habitat restoration, contributing to State climate and health strategies.
7. Embed Nature Prescription programs as permanent features of the Park Lands to support public health and wellbeing.
8. Link Park Lands management to climate targets by recognising them as natural cooling infrastructure and carbon sinks aligned with South Australia's Climate Change Action Plan.
9. Adopt whole-of-life carbon and circular design principles for projects at the Park Lands interface, in line with Infrastructure Australia and Green Building Council guidance.
10. Formalise collaborative planning partnerships, including Green Adelaide, as delivery partners to support long-term ecological and climate resilience outcomes.
11. Promote the Park Lands as a platform for global leadership in nature-based urban design and climate adaptation, leveraging opportunities linked to COP31 and other international events.
12. Commit to preparing land management agreements prior to entering contracts for all significant Park Lands events. These agreements must safeguard public access, quantify environmental impacts (including any proposed built infrastructure), be co-developed with Kadaltilla, and be released for a period long enough to allow genuine public consultation before being legislated.

Implementation Pathways & Collaboration Opportunities

To support delivery of the above actions, the Institute identifies the following pathways:

- **Cross-Agency Collaboration** — Establish a coordinated approach between state agencies, City of Adelaide, Green Adelaide, heritage bodies, and Kaurna representatives to align planning, climate, and community wellbeing objectives.
- **Strengthen Kadaltilla's Advisory Role** — Enhance the capability of the Kadaltilla / Adelaide Park Lands Authority through improved access to interdisciplinary expertise and appropriate resourcing, supporting consistent, evidence-based advice on the protection, management and enhancement of the Park Lands.

- Evidence-Based Capital Planning — Use urban heat, biodiversity, and wellbeing data to inform future investment, ensuring positive net community outcomes.
- Shared Community Outcomes Framework — Develop performance measures to track community benefit, climate resilience, and public health impact.

Conclusion

The Adelaide Park Lands are a cornerstone of South Australia’s heritage and a critical asset for its future. Protecting and enhancing them is a strategic investment in community wellbeing, climate resilience, cultural identity, and economic prosperity.

By strengthening legislative protections, preserving the Park Lands as a single continuous landscape, and fostering design-led, collaborative stewardship, the South Australian Government can ensure that the Park Lands remain a green legacy for generations to come.

Legend of Acronyms

AIA — Australian Institute of Architects

CBD — Central Business District

COP31 — 31st United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties

GBCA — Green Building Council of Australia

IA — Infrastructure Australia

NCC — National Construction Code

ODASA — Office for Design and Architecture South Australia

WHO — World Health Organization

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