

**Item name:** Cook and Phillip Park "Earth Mother" play sculpture

**Location:** Yurong Parkway Sydney 2000

Sydney

**Address:** Yurong Parkway

**Planning:** Sydney South

**Suburb/nearest town:** Sydney 2000

**Local govt area:** Sydney

**Parish:**

**State:** NSW

**County:**

**Other/former names:** Mother and Child

**Area/group/complex:**

**Group ID:**

**Aboriginal area:**

**Curtilage/boundary:**

**Item type:** Movable / Collection

**Group:** Education

**Category:** Other - Education

**Owner:** Local Government

**Admin codes:**

**Code 2:**

**Code 3:**

**Current use:** Play sculpture

**Former uses:** Play sculpture

**Assessed significance:** Local

**Endorsed significance:** Local

**Statement of significance:** The Cook and Phillip Park play sculpture, also known as "Earth Mother", was the first sculpture specifically intended for the pleasure and education of children to be fabricated and installed in the City of Sydney, and is possibly the first of its kind in Australia. It is understood to be the first public artwork initiated by the City of Sydney. The play sculpture is the work of respected and significant sculptor, Anita Aarons, and a rare public example of her work in Sydney, as well as a rare work of art designed for specific educational purposes.

The play sculpture has aesthetic significance as a mid-twentieth century sculpture and as a work of art specifically intended to encourage and expand the aesthetic sensibilities of children. The use of concrete incorporating granite and marble dust to enhance the sculpture's tactile qualities has some technical significance. It is representative of the abstract figurative sculptural work produced by many sculptors during the post-World War II era.

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**Historical notes of provenance:** This site forms part of the land of the Gadigal people, the traditional custodians of land within the City of Sydney council boundaries. For information about the Aboriginal history of the local area see the City's Barani website: <http://www.sydneybarani.com.au/>

The City of Sydney has a relatively long history of socially responsible projects. One enduring example has been the provision of playgrounds and kindergartens for children. The Phillip Park Play Sculpture ("Earth Mother") is part of this history and has been a unique feature of the park since April 1952.

The land that comprises Cook and Phillip Parks was, after initial European settlement, part of the Government Domain. After completion of Hyde Park Barracks in 1819, it was cleared to form a garden in which the convicts assigned to the Barracks would work. The poor quality of the soil led to the abandonment of the garden by 1831. From then it appears to have fallen into disuse. In 1832, the construction of College Street separated the former convict garden from Hyde Park. Boomerang Street was constructed during the early 1850s. By the mid decade, a network of paths traversed the open land, which was eventually dedicated as parkland in 1878. Cook Park lay on the south-west side of Boomerang Street and Phillip Park on its north-east side.

There were incursions into the parkland. In 1880, one of Sydney's first bowling clubs was built in Cook Park, and a police station was completed on the periphery of Phillip Park at the corner of Cathedral and Riley Streets (since replaced by the Police Citizen's Youth Club in the early 1960s). A further incursion took place between 1912 and 1915 with the construction of Haig Avenue to provide tramway access to Woolloomooloo. Cook, Phillip and Hyde Parks were vested in Council in 1904.

In 1907, a playground was constructed in Phillip Park, followed by a Council plant nursery in 1910. In September 1925, Council approved a new playground site in Phillip Park between Haig Avenue and the Industrial Blind Institute at the south eastern corner of Phillip Park, which had been established in 1878. Some years later the nursery depot was converted into a children's library and crafts centre in response to an initiative of the Children's Library and Crafts Movement, and it opened to the public in March 1937. An open air theatre associated with the library and crafts centre – Australia's first outdoor theatre for children – was opened by the Lady Mayoress, Mrs Nock, on 1 March 1938. It soon became a significant performance venue. These successful early endeavours to enhance children's recreational and cultural opportunities have all made way for later works and development.

Mary Matheson, secretary of the Children's Library and Crafts Movement wrote to Lord Mayor Ernest O'Dea in the middle of April 1951 to encourage the experimental installation of a play sculpture near its Phillip Park Centre. The following month a number of Anita Aarons' play sculptures, in the form of maquettes, were included in the Contemporary Art Society's exhibition at Farmer & Co's Blaxland Gallery. Aarons submitted two maquettes to the City Council for its consideration. A meeting was subsequently held at the Council on 25 June 1951, attended by Anita Aarons, Mary Matheson and sculptors, Gerald Lewers and Lyndon Dadswell. A number of maquettes of sculptures were presented for consideration. The Council finally decided to trial one of the sculptures on 16 July 1951. Anita Aarons provided a quote of £243/15/- for the work, which was accepted in October, and the completed sculpture was installed at the beginning of April 1952. The sculpture was regarded by Council as an experiment.

Aarons' sculpture was derived from her contribution to the Contemporary Art Society's annual exhibition for 1950, a larger than life female nude cast in reddish brown concrete. It did not sell, so ended up in her family's front yard in Castlecrag. The sculpture fascinated her two daughters as well as other children in the neighbourhood, who liked to touch its rounded forms, slide down its surfaces and crawl into the hollow formed by one of its arms. According to Aarons, "My two girls, Bertina and Tonia, aged nine and seven, have found it a satisfactory play piece and a lovable friend." Not long after this, Aarons wrote to the Children's Library and Crafts Movement. It included her Notes on Sculpture for Children: a method of education through familiarity, which outlined her views concerning play sculpture. The surfaces and shapes of the works would encourage children to explore their tactile qualities, experience them as objects fully in the round and discover the changing effects of light over surfaces, shapes and colours. The intention was to educate children to become responsive to, and positive about, good sculpture. Ideally a play sculpture would be placed in every park and playground. Anita

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Aarons cited contemporary precedents in Norway and Sweden, and pioneering efforts underway in America by sculptors such as Isamu Noguchi and Edgar Miller.

In post-war Europe, Danish architect and sculptor, Egon Møller-Nielsen (1915-1959), was responsible for free-form abstract play sculptures installed in several of Stockholm's new parks, considered by contemporaries to be exemplary examples of their kind, during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Humlegården, a major park close to the centre of Stockholm, became the location for Møller-Nielsen's late 1940s "Tufsen", considered the first play sculpture installation in the world. In 1953, Frank Caplan, a founder of the American company, Creative Playthings, visited Sweden and met Møller-Nielsen, then subsequently marketed a version of Møller-Nielsen's play sculpture "Spiral Slide". At this time, it was generally believed that if children played on sculptural objects they would develop a greater appreciation of fine art.

When interviewed for the Sunday Sun towards the end of 1951, Aarons anticipated the effects of her play sculpture on children:

Of course children will play just as happily in a junk-yard but they would come out of it with a sense of disorder, she told us...They will love to play on my sculpture, too, and they should come away with a sense of order and beauty...They will feel it, touch it, climb all over it, and that way they will reach an appreciation of it. (Sunday Sun, 18 November 1951).

The Phillip Park sculpture became known as "Earth Mother". Its flowing forms, solid areas and voids suggest the sculpture of Henry Moore and evidently became quite popular with children. "Earth Mother" was apparently physically kind to children, according to artist Herbert Badham.

"The artists of the High Renaissance produced for the material requirements of their day, and Anita Aarons shows here that new avenues have been created, in addition to the old ones that remain, along which the artist and the public, if they will, may meet and confer. To permit polishing, the re-inforced [sic] concrete used in this playground sculpture is made of granite and marble dust instead of sand, thus eliminating abrasive qualities" (A Gallery of Australian Art).

A number of newspaper and journal articles about the sculpture appeared around the time it was installed in Phillip Park, while it later appeared in professional journals such as *Constructional Review* and *Architecture* in Australia.

At the Society of Sculptors and Associates' 1952 exhibition Aarons continued to explore the potential of playground sculpture – her "playground and 'shadow' sculptures" apparently combined "an abstract line with useful attributes for play and shade blending into any scene devised by Nature." (Sydney Morning Herald, 4 November 1952). She also displayed a model playground at Parramatta during its Civic Week, staged in November 1952.

In 1997, Cook and Phillip Parks saw major redevelopment involving removal of the bowling club (which had occupied the site since 1880), Boomerang Street and Haig Avenue, and construction of a modern swimming pool complex and grey-paved concourse in front of St Marys Cathedral. The sculpture was relocated during 1992 within the Park, retaining its general location when the adjacent Phillip Park Child Care Centre was constructed around 2000.

"Earth Mother" was a significant initial endeavour on the part of the City of Sydney into the realm of public art. It was followed by the King George V and King George VI memorial in Hyde Park's Sandringham Gardens. Completed in 1954, the memorial included works by sculptor Lyndon Dadswell and architect Dr Henry Epstein. It was followed some years later by the inauguration of the Sydney Fountains Committee on 3 September 1958. This was ultimately responsible for the installation of several fountains, some of which, such as Woodward & Taranto's 1961 El Alamein fountain at Kings Cross, were outstandingly successful. Fountains were installed in a succession of public spaces until the second half of the 1960s. This activity was accompanied by the installation of sculpture and other artworks in and on privately owned commercial buildings and public buildings.

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Anita Aarons (1912-2000):

Anita Abbott Aarons was the only daughter of Mr and Mrs Emanuel Aarons, born on 6 November 1912 at Nurse Saunderson Brown's Private Hospital in Woolcott Street, Darlinghurst. Her father was a well-known theatre organist, composer and orchestra arranger. He spent his childhood in Melbourne. At an early age it was evident that Aarons was an exceptional pianist and he studied at controversial conductor George Marshall-Hall's Conservatorium. By 1911, Aarons had moved to Sydney and was conductor of the Tivoli Theatre's orchestra. He was later conductor of the Lyceum Theatre Orchestra. By the end of the 1920s, he was leader of the St James Theatre band and organist at the Capitol Theatre. He also composed music for films and songs. Anita was the eldest of four children.

Anita Aarons initially studied art in Wellington, New Zealand. Between 1926 and 1928, she was taught by artist Julia Lynch (1896-1975), who studied at the Slade School in London then returned to New Zealand. In 1930, Aarons commenced studying sculpture at East Sydney Technical College under influential sculptor and teacher, Rayner Hoff. In 1936, she married a Albert Date, who had a Bachelor of Economics, who subsequently became a rural economist, secretary of the Commonwealth Liquid Fuel Control Board (which was in charge of petrol rationing during World War II) and economist to the Rural Bank of NSW from 1947 to 1954.

In September 1938, Anita Aarons took part in the Society of Artists' annual exhibition, which featured works by international artists such as Jacob Epstein and Augustus John, and a number of local artists - established figures and emerging newcomers that included Sir Bertram Mackennal, Lyndon Dadswell, Tom Roberts, and Douglas Annand. Aarons' sculptural contribution, a work entitled "Burden", was considered "eloquent in form." Aarons received her diploma from East Sydney Technical College in 1939. Examples of Aarons' sculptures and reliefs, displayed at the Diploma Exhibition staged in December 1939, were reported in the Sydney Morning Herald to "have real feeling in them, and are not composed of second-hand ideas." Aarons was an early, if not foundation, member of the Contemporary Art Society, formed in July 1938. Its first Sydney exhibition was staged in 1940 and in later years Aarons served on the committee of the Society's NSW branch.

Anita Aarons was a foundation member of the Society of Sculptors and Associates, which was founded in February 1951 to promote the cause of sculpture in Australia. The main impetus for the Society seems to have come from sculptor Gerald Lewers. The Society had several objectives, which included: advancing the understanding and appreciation of sculpture and encourage use and application of sculpture and associated arts; providing the means for creative work and study by its members; establishing, maintaining and reviewing when necessary a code of professional practice and ethics; and printing, circulating and publishing bulletins, papers and books. The Society's endeavours succeeded over the next few years by means of exhibitions, workshops and direct approaches to business concerns. Gerald Lewers, Lyndon Dadswell and Anita Aarons played an important part in these achievements.

Aarons entered the international sculpture competition organised in 1952 by the Institute of Contemporary Arts in England to commemorate "The Unknown Political Prisoner". It attracted 3,500 entrants worldwide, including 31 from Australia. She was one of several Australian women sculptors who submitted an entry. Although she was not placed in local judging, the entry of Margel Hinder, along with those of Tom Bass and John Bruhn, was selected to be sent to London for final evaluation. None were finally selected, although Hinder's entry was awarded an equal third prize. Anita Aarons' unconventional and sculptural ceramic tableware received a fair amount of publicity and some awards during the first half of the 1950s.

In 1954, Aarons taught sculpture at East Sydney Technical College, but by August that year, moved to Melbourne. Here, she was involved with a whole spectrum of educational organisations. Initially she spent three years teaching at the Kindergarten Training College. Aarons' Melbourne years were significant because of her influential role as a teacher. She became a member of the Art Teachers' Association (vice-president between 1960 and 1964), wrote art curricula for the Victorian Education Department and was appointed Head of the Sculpture Department at Caulfield Technical College, training secondary school arts and crafts teachers in sculpture and design. As well, she instituted summer schools so that teachers could upgrade their skills in art

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education. Aarons lectured and wrote on art education and assumed the role of teacher-demonstrator during the 1963 UNESCO conference held in Canberra.

Aarons participated in the important Twelve Melbourne Sculptors Exhibition in 1957, then the Recent Australian Sculpture exhibition, which was staged during 1964-1965, which toured the federal and state capitals and Newcastle.

After a fall that left her injured Aarons began making jewellery and prints. In 1963, some of her jewellery was selected to represent Australia at the 1964 World Crafts Conference in New York, which she subsequently attended as a delegate. She moved to Toronto, where she taught sculpture and design at the city's Central Technical School. Between 1965 and 1971, Aarons was the Allied Arts editor for the journal Canadian Architecture. From 1966 until 1969, Aarons designed artworks for the Beth Emeth Synagogue in Toronto. Between 1969 and 1972, she consulted to the Art Gallery of Ontario and curated shows for regional galleries. She was both a founder (1976) and director of the Harborfront Art Gallery in Toronto. Aarons' significant contributions to Canada's cultural life were honoured in 1983 when she was awarded the Diplome d'Honneur by the Canadian Conference of the Arts. She married artist Merton Chambers, who had also worked on the Beth Emeth Synagogue. Aarons and Chambers returned to Australia in 1985 and settled in Queensland. Both became quite involved with Noosa Gallery. It has been suggested that Aarons was awarded the Order of Australia Medal in 1994.

Anita Aarons died in Brisbane on 3 January 2000.

<b>Themes:</b>	<b>National theme</b>	<b>State theme</b>	<b>Local theme</b>
	4. Settlement	Towns, suburbs and villages	Community facilities
	8. Culture	Leisure	Playground
	8. Culture	Creative endeavour	Modern architecture & art
	9. Phases of Life	Persons	Anita Aarons, artist

**Designer:** Anita Aarons

**Builder:** Anita Aarons

**Year started:** 1951

**Year completed:** 1952

**Circa:** No

**Physical description:** The Cook & Phillip Park Play Sculpture is an abstract figurative work, fabricated from concrete with smooth exposed surfaces, located in an open paved and fenced space. The concrete composition incorporates granite and marble dust to enhance the sculpture's tactile qualities. Its organic form recalls the formal properties of the work of prominent English sculptor Henry Moore. The sculpture is designed so that children can crawl through, climb in, over and slide across its sections.

**Physical condition level:** Good

**Physical condition:** The Phillip Park Play sculpture is in good condition.

**Archaeological potential level:** Not assessed

**Archaeological potential Detail:**

**Modification dates:** The play sculpture was moved from its original location in 1992. There have been no other apparent modifications to the work.

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**Recommended management:** Retain and conserve the sculpture.

Enhance the sculpture's setting or relocate to a more sympathetic setting in Cook & Phillip Park, preferably in close proximity to its original site, once this is more precisely determined.

Continue to make the sculpture accessible to children.

Maintain the sculpture in accordance with the guidelines in Maintenance Strategy for the Sydney Open Museum (Anne Cummins, February 2000).

**Management:** **Management category**  
Statutory Instrument

**Management name**  
List on a Local Environmental Plan (LEP)

**Further comments:** Heritage inventory sheets are often not comprehensive, and should be regarded as a general guide only. Inventory sheets are based on information available, and often do not include the social history of sites and buildings. Inventory sheets are constantly updated by the City as further information becomes available. An inventory sheet with little information may simply indicate that there has been no building work done to the item recently: it does not mean that items are not significant. Further research is always recommended as part of preparation of development proposals for heritage items, and is necessary in preparation of Heritage Impact Assessments and Conservation Management Plans, so that the significance of heritage items can be fully assessed prior to submitting development applications.

**Criteria a):** The "Earth Mother" play sculpture was the first sculpture specifically intended for the pleasure and education of children to be fabricated and installed in Sydney, and is possibly the first of its kind in Australia. Documentary evidence indicates that the sculpture is the first initiative by the City of Sydney to introduce artworks into the public realm.

The sculpture is significant as an embodiment mid-twentieth century theories of environmental determinism (euthenics) and influencing personality and behaviour through the arts and architecture.

**Criteria b):** The "Earth Mother" play sculpture is the work of respected sculptor, Anita Aarons, who is highly regarded at a national and international level for her endeavours in the fine and decorative arts and as an arts educator. She was very active and prominent in groups such as the Contemporary Art Society and Society of Sculptors in Sydney during the 1940s and early 1950s and in the promotion of sculpture generally. It was noted in the prestigious national journal *Art & Australia* that "one of the few reminders that Aarons was a recognised artist in Sydney prior to her moving to Melbourne...is Play sculpture (Earth Mother)...in Cook and Phillip Park, Sydney."

**Criteria c):** The "Earth Mother" play sculpture has aesthetic significance as a mid-twentieth century sculpture and as a work of art specifically intended to enhance and extend the aesthetic sensibilities of children. Spaces and forms suitable for children's play have been integrated into the work as a whole.

**Criteria d):** This requires further investigation. Although the sculpture was popular with children in the past, its significance to present-day communities has not been ascertained.

**Criteria e):** The use of concrete incorporating granite and marble dust to enhance the play sculpture's tactile qualities has some technical significance.

**Criteria f):** The "Earth Mother" play sculpture is a rare work of art designed for specific educational purposes rather than commemoration. It is a rare play sculpture in Sydney and possibly Australia. It is a rare public example of the work of Anita Aarons in Sydney.

**Criteria g):** The sculpture is representative of abstract figurative work produced by a number of sculptors during the post-World War II era.

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**Intactness/Integrity:** High

References:	Author	Title	Year
	Ken Scarlett	Australian Sculptors	1980
	City of Sydney	TC File 2248/51	1951
	Anita Aarons	Notes on sculpture for children: a method of education through	
		"Promising Young Artists", 3 September 1938	1938
		"Exhibition of Sculpture in Open Air", 10 November 1951	1951
		"Exhibition of Sculpture in Open Air", 10 November 1951	1951
		"Interesting Women in the News. Sculptress Plans New Playgro	1951
		"Sculpture for New Parks", 17 June 1951	1951
		"Children to Play on Park Statue", 17 July 1951	1951

Studies:	Author	Title	Number	Year
	Tanner Kibble Denton Architects	Modern Movement Architecture in Central Sydney - Heritag		2018

Parcels:	Parcel code	Lot number	Section number	Plan code	Plan number
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**Latitude:**

**Longitude:**

**Location validity:**

**Spatial accuracy:**

**Map name:**

**Map scale:**

**AMG zone:**

**Easting:**

**Northing:**

Listing:	Name	Title	Number	ListingDate
	Cook and Phillip Park	Local Environmental Plan	I1655	21/12/2012
	Modern Movement Architecture in	Heritage study		01/01/2018

**Data entry:** Data first entered: 17/09/1993

Data updated: 30/04/2018

Status: Completed

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**Image:**



**Caption:** "Earth Mother"

**Copy right:** Tanner Kibble Denton

**Image by:** Roy Lumby

**Image date:** 10/02/2017

**Image number:**

**Image url:** <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/maritimeheritageapp/resources/Heritage/shi/WebAPP/345089f036d641f46a586f279d30e2b4250.JPG>

**Thumbnail url:** [http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/maritimeheritageapp/resources/Heritage/shi/WebAPP/Thumb\\_test345089f036d641f46a586f279d30e2b4250.JPG](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/maritimeheritageapp/resources/Heritage/shi/WebAPP/Thumb_test345089f036d641f46a586f279d30e2b4250.JPG)

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**Caption:** "Earth Mother"

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**Caption:** The playground containing "Earth Mother"

**Copy right:** Tanner Kibble Denton

**Image by:** Roy Lumby

**Image date:** 10/02/2017

**Image number:**

**Image url:** <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/maritimeheritageapp/resources/Heritage/shi/WebAP/P/34577f71cfdc9ae41268e70773131023a34.JPG>

**Thumbnail url:** [http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/maritimeheritageapp/resources/Heritage/shi/WebAP/P/Thumb\\_test34577f71cfdc9ae41268e70773131023a34.JPG](http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/maritimeheritageapp/resources/Heritage/shi/WebAP/P/Thumb_test34577f71cfdc9ae41268e70773131023a34.JPG)

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**Caption:** "Earth Mother " in its original setting

**Copy right:**

**Image by:** Milton Kent

**Image date:**

**Image number:**

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**Caption:** "Earth Mother " in its original setting

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