

HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE: ENGAGING WITH THE ARCHITECTS AS PART OF LOCAL HERITAGE LISTING

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INTRODUCTION

In 2004, Woollahra Municipal Council, the local government area for some of Sydney's notably well-heeled suburbs such as Bellevue Hill, Vaucluse, Woollahra, and Darling Point, as well as the historically rich and varied neighbourhoods of Paddington and Woollahra, commissioned Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners, in conjunction with Professor Jennifer Taylor, to carry out a ground-breaking heritage study of 24 contemporary (post-1950) buildings.

Works by several of Australia's leading architects were included, including Sydney Ancher, Harry Seidler, Ken Woolley, and Glenn Murcutt, as well as Peter Muller, Guilford Bell, Douglas Snelling, and Neville Gruzman. The study also included works by Don Gazzard, Michael Dysart, Terry Dorrough, and Vivian Fraser, Colin Still, Espie Dods, Alec Tzannes, and Peter Stronach.

A combination of factors in the latter 20th century led to the Woollahra municipality's importance in modern architecture. Many suburbs in the area were subdivided from the early nineteenth century and intensely developed by the end of the 1920s. The building sites which remained available to architects in the 1960s and 1970s were sites previously overlooked because of their difficult topography. These steep, rocky harbourside sites offered a perfect palette for the designers of the emerging Sydney School who adopted such terrain in their site-responsive architecture.

Another factor in the municipality's architectural development was the conservation of Paddington and Woollahra. Largely built out by the end of the nineteenth century, these high density areas had fallen out of favour in Sydney's post-war suburbanisation, only to be rediscovered in the 1970s as the conservation movement gained momentum. Several architects in the study built their own houses on sites in Paddington where demolished terrace houses once stood, or on leftover sites enclosed in the network of laneways typical of the area. The study also included a number of client-commissioned houses in these suburbs where the historical context dictated the prevailing site response.

While several other local governments in NSW have included individual modern heritage items in their heritage lists (e.g., North Sydney, Willoughby), it is believed that Woollahra is the first Council to have commissioned an entire study of contemporary architecture. This paper explores the heritage assessment process as it applies to modern architecture and focuses on the involvement of the architects whose works were represented in the study.

WHAT SET THIS STUDY APART FROM MORE TRADITIONAL HERITAGE STUDIES?

Essentially, the Woollahra contemporary heritage study followed the same methodology used with assessing other more traditional heritage studies which tend to focus on older buildings. Each potential item was visited, photographed, researched, and assessed according to the standard NSW heritage criteria. However, the nature of the subject matter caused the study to differ from most in several ways.

The potential items nominated for assessment were selected by the Council prior to the engagement of the heritage consultant. Buildings were chosen in consultation with representatives of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (NSW chapter) as well as with individuals who are interested in or knowledgeable about modern architecture. There was no opportunity for the consultants to suggest additional items to include in the study. Unfortunately, one item was eliminated from the study when it was discovered that extensive alterations and

additions had commenced (with Council approval) which rendered the original design virtually unrecognisable.

As is often routine with local government heritage studies, all of the owners of items included in the study were contacted by the Council. However, in this case, the Council requested that the consultants be allowed to inspect the items internally as well as externally. Somewhat surprisingly, fourteen owners invited us to make internal inspections (though some needed to be persuaded by Council's heritage officer). In several cases, the items to be assessed were still in their original ownership, meaning the commissioning client was sometimes available to tell us more about the house. The nine remaining buildings were viewed from the public domain only.

The Council was able to provide us with the original plans for most of the buildings in the study. Because all of the buildings were recent enough to be entered in Council's database of Building Applications (BA) and Development Applications (DA), we were able to ascertain whether any applications for alterations were approved subsequent to the original building approval. This gave us very good clues as to how intact a building was when we were not able to inspect it internally. Study limitations meant that we could not call up the individual BA/DA files to determine the exact nature of alterations and additions when it was not clear from other sources what the work had entailed or whether it had been carried out.

Generally, the combination of information gathered from the site inspections, original plans, the Council's BA/DA records, published sources, and interviews with the owners and architects enabled us to make a recommendation for listing, even where internal inspection was not possible. However, in the instance of the Barrett House alterations by Peter Stronach of Allen Jack + Cottier, the design involved completely gutting and reworking a Paddington terrace house, while retaining the entire external envelope. As Council records indicated that alterations had been approved for the building since the time of Stronach's work, it was impossible to determine whether the Stronach design was intact at all without internally inspecting the building.

Another challenge of the study was assessing modern architecture within the heritage framework of the standard NSW heritage assessment criteria. Although we found that the seven criteria were relevant, it was necessary to clarify what types of significance fell under each criterion. This was carefully negotiated with our client in order to ensure an understanding on behalf of all parties. For example, the awards a design may have achieved at the time of its construction were considered as historical significance, while its inclusion on the RAIA (NSW Chapter) *Register of 20th Century Buildings of Significance* was attributed as social significance. The importance of each architect whose work was included in the study was also carefully considered, in terms of his body of work, its influence on other Australian architects, and whether his body of work was widely recognised (on a state, national, or international level).

We rigorously adhered to this structure in an effort to ensure the heritage assessments were as systematic as possible, in order that they would stand up to the scrutiny of the affected owners, Councilors, and members of the public who wished to review and comment on the recommendations of the study. It was anticipated (correctly) that any opposition to the recommendations would call into question the validity of heritage listing modern architecture. While ultimately, each assessment relied on a professional judgment of the aesthetic merit of a building, the inventory sheets contained as much detailed and referenced information as possible, so as to clearly demonstrate the factors which led to each conclusion and limit the potential for argument.

Finally, a key difference of the Woollahra heritage study was the Council's brief to interview all of the living architects represented in the study. To our knowledge, this has not been systematically carried out as part of any previous heritage study in New South Wales. As interested as we were in the information each architect could tell us about the circumstances surrounding each project's design and construction, we also saw the exercise as an outstanding opportunity to collect the stories, influences, aims, and reflections of several architects who went on to become this

country's most recognised, celebrated (and at times castigated) late 20th century modern architects.

HOW DID THE ARCHITECT INTERVIEWS AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF THE STUDY?

The Council's brief did not stipulate any detailed requirements for the interviews, so we developed our own list of questions. We met with each architect for about an hour to discuss the specifics of the design in question, i.e. the cost of the building, the builder, the primary design intentions, etc. We also posed questions about the place of that design in the architect's overall career, what influences were brought to bear on the design, and how they felt about change in relation to the subject building. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed.

The architect interviews were particularly helpful in understanding what aspects of each design were of importance in the mind of the architect, and allowed us to make definitive statements about the architect's intentions which could not be inferred reasonably from other sources. For example, Ken Woolley noted the importance of the post-modern elements found at his own house (1980) in Cooper Street, Paddington, whereas the published Merit Award citation called into question those same elements' effectiveness, referring to them as 'eccentricities'.

Although the architect interviews informed the assessment process, they did not dictate the outcome. For example, Glenn Murcutt's 1978 Reynolds House (John Street, Woollahra) was recommended for listing, despite Murcutt's statement that he 'would not argue that it would warrant a heritage listing, on the basis that Council destroyed it from the beginning...' because the Council required his design to relate to a single-storey cottage adjacent which was subsequently allowed to be demolished and replaced with a two-storey building of inferior design.

In many cases, the architect's own statements about the design added a great deal of authority to the assessment. Rather than simply reporting on our opinion, we were able to report that the designer himself considered the building to be important in his oeuvre.

THE ARCHITECTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD HERITAGE LISTING

Many of the architects whose designs were under assessment were ambivalent toward the notion of a work of their own being heritage listed. Many felt that, given the difficulties posed by Woollahra Council in assessing their Development Applications for these works some years earlier, the Council had little authority to turn around and heritage list the buildings. Others felt that heritage listing would go some way to protecting their design from the actions of others. For example, Don Gazzard saw heritage listing the Wentworth Memorial Chapel, Vacluse (1964 – Clarke Gazzard and Yeomans) as a way to impose a greater level of scrutiny of any changes the parish wanted to make, particularly as some repairs and the addition of toilet block had been carried out without Gazzard's involvement.

Espie Dods had previously had a 1990 house in Point Piper mistakenly recommended for heritage listing as a 'fine 1860s Italianate villa'. Although the listing did not go ahead when it was explained that the house was in fact not of the 1860s, the original client went on to sell the house to new owners who had it demolished. Dods therefore saw heritage listing as an opportunity to protect one of his buildings from demolition by subsequent owners.

Glenn Murcutt expressed the view that heritage listing should be reserved for a 'building worthy of all time', and he was unprepared to say that any of his own buildings (or any buildings in Australia for that matter, with the possible exception of the Sydney Opera House) could be classified as such.

THOUGHTS RAISED BY THE STUDY'S CONCLUSIONS

Unsurprisingly in a climate of opposition to heritage listing generally, the contemporary heritage study was greeted with skepticism from some quarters, in particular the owners of some of the houses in the study. However, with only one exception, those houses which were still in the ownership of the original commissioning clients were strongly supported for heritage listing. We sometimes encountered reluctance on the part of an owner to recognise that they occupied a piece of fine modern architecture. The idea of the house as an asset, to be sold or redeveloped to fund one's retirement, was as pervasive with modern heritage items as in the rest of Sydney's housing stock.

An interesting question for the heritage profession was raised in one instance, where the owners of one item recommended for listing objected to the listing on the grounds that they owned the State-heritage listed nineteenth century house next door, and intended to restore the garden of the nineteenth century house by demolishing the 1955 Douglas Snelling designed house adjacent. Naturally any decision to allow demolition of the 1955 building rests with Woollahra Council (or the Land & Environment Court), however, the informal proposal gave rise to some interesting questions— Is older heritage more 'important' than younger heritage? Is restoration of a State heritage item desirable enough to incur the demolition of a local heritage item? Should a modern heritage item be sacrificed for the better interpretation of an older heritage item?

Another question is whether the heritage listing process is the best way to protect our best modern architecture. With many local governments struggling to review their heritage schedules with any regularity, it is unlikely modern architecture will be systematically studied until the buildings themselves are more than fifty years old or more – and no longer considered contemporary. In the face of development pressures, especially in Sydney's metropolitan Council areas, applications for demolitions or substantial alterations flow thick and fast, and it appears there is rarely any consideration given to the potential importance of a building for its contemporary design values. Certainly anything that is entered on the RAIA (NSW Chapter) *Register of 20th Century Buildings of Significance* could be construed to have a non-statutory heritage listing, but how diligent are Council assessment officers in requesting heritage impact statements to accompany development applications for such buildings? Should architecture which wins an RAIA award automatically be treated as a heritage item for the purpose of assessing future development applications?

CONCLUSION

The heritage study revealed that, while many modern masterpieces (especially those still in their original ownership) are still well loved, to an alarming extent, modern architecture is seen by the community as disposable.

As with all heritage studies, the completion of the Woollahra contemporary heritage study did not signal the protection of all the places worthy of listing in the municipality. Still in the Woollahra local government area there are dozens of outstanding examples of post-1950 architecture (not to mention early 20th century architecture) which remain unidentified and unassessed. Some high profile cases in the media highlight this outstanding gap in strategic planning. For example, Tahiti, an enormous island style house designed by Douglas Snelling in 1966, was reported in 2007 to have been purchased for the record price of over \$29 million with the pure intention of knocking it down and rebuilding. The group of 24 items which formed this study represents a worthy start on identifying and protecting modern architecture, but it is evidently just the tip of a large iceberg.

Woollahra Council voted to include eleven of the nineteen items recommended for listing in the Woollahra Local Environment Plan heritage schedule. The LEP amendment is currently awaiting gazettal.



Massive sandstone fireplace in the 1955 Sir Theo Kelly house by Douglas Snelling. (Photograph: Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners)



Horizontal terrace forms characterise Neville Gruzman's 1958 design for this Darling Point house. (Photograph: Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners)



The two-storey development (left) compromises Glenn Murcutt's 1978 John Street design.
(Photograph: Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners)



Stripped Classical style house in Wentworth Road, Vaucluse, by Guilford Bell, 1970-73.
(Photograph: Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners)



Apart from the gelato colour scheme, nothing about the street appearance of this Paddington Street house suggests the modern alterations completed within the Victorian envelope by Peter Stronach, 1980. (Photograph: Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners)



Ken Woolley's 1966 terraced design for The Penthouses, New Beach Road, Darling Point, was seminal in the development of townhouse design in Sydney. (Photograph: Clive Lucas Stapleton & Partners)

BUILDINGS ASSESSED AS PART OF THE CONTEMPORARY HERITAGE STUDY

54 Caledonia Street, Paddington (Vivian Fraser)
* 8A Cooper Street, Paddington (Ancher Mortlock and Woolley - Ken Woolley)
85 Drumalbyn Road, Bellevue Hill (LT Rayner)
* 4 Dunara Gardens, Point Piper (Peter Muller)
351 Edgecliff Road, Edgecliff (Harry Seidler)
382 Edgecliff Road, Edgecliff (O. Deomedé)
11 Elizabeth Place, Paddington (Terry Dorrough)
* 32B Fitzwilliam Street, Vaucluse (Clarke Gazzard and Yeomans - Don Gazzard)
* 10 Hampden Avenue, Darling Point (Sydney Ancher)
* 88 Hargrave Street, Paddington (Don Gazzard)
58 John Street, Woollahra (Glenn Murcutt)
* 5 Kilminster Lane, Woollahra (Glenn Murcutt)
* 20 Milton Avenue, Woollahra (Michael Dysart)
58-61 New Beach Road, Darling Point (Ancher, Murray, Mortlock and Woolley – Ken Woolley)
349 New South Head Road, Double Bay (Douglas Snelling)
8 Oswald Street, Darling Point (Neville Gruzman)
132 Paddington Street, Paddington (Allen Jack + Cottier – Peter Stronach)
* 88 Sutherland Street, Paddington (Glenn Murcutt)
* 8 Victoria Street, Watsons Bay (Colin and Irene Still)
24a Victoria Road, Bellevue Hill (Douglas Snelling)
* 10 Wallis Avenue, Woollahra (Espie Dods)
40 Wentworth Road, Vaucluse (Guilford Bell)
* 159 Windsor Street, Paddington (Alexander Tzannes)

* Indicates item to be included in the Woollahra LEP heritage schedule

16 Milton Avenue, Woollahra (McConnel Smith and Johnson – Tom Heath) was eliminated from the study as extensive alterations had been approved and were underway at the time of the study.

REFERENCES

'\$29.5 million, only to knock it down', *Sun-Herald*, 20 November 2007.

Woolley House, Merit Award citation, *Architecture in Australia* vol 70 no 6, 1981, pp. 28-9.

Interviews with architects, transcripts of recordings made by Clive Lucas, Stapleton & Partners, 2004-05.