



Hunters Hill Trust Journal

FROM THE PRESIDENT’S DESKTOP

Tony Coote

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.

I have just been reading Evelyn Waugh’s first novel, *Decline and Fall*, which was written in 1928 when he was 25. In it there are some wonderfully sharp jabs at Modern Architecture and the superficiality of the fashionable and moneyed social-set, particularly as personified by the beautiful Margot Beste-Chetwynde.

Margot’s newly acquired country house, King’s Thursday, “*had stood on its place which since the reign of Bloody Mary had been the seat of the Earls of Pastmaster. For three centuries the poverty and inertia of this noble family had preserved its home unmodified by any of the succeeding fashions that fell upon domestic architecture. No wing had been added, no window filled in; no portico, façade, terrace, orangery, tower or battlement marred its timbered front. In the craze for coal-gas and indoor sanitation, King’s Thursday had slept unscathed by plumber or engineer.*”

When Margot decided to pull the down King’s Thursday and rebuild it there was consternation among the neighbours, “*who as the work of demolition proceeded, with the aid of all that was most pulverising in modern machinery, became increasingly enraged, and, in their eagerness to preserve for the county a little of the great manor, even resorted to predatory expeditions, from which they would return with lumps of carved stonework for their rock-gardens, until the contractors were forced to maintain an extra watchman at night.*”

The architect for the new building was Professor Otto Friedrich Silenus and it was his first important commission. “*Something clean and square*”, had been Mrs Beste-Chetwynde’s instructions.”

“*The problem of architecture as I see it*”, the architect told a journalist who had come to report on his surprising creation of ferro-concrete and aluminium, “*is the problem of all art – the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form. The only building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men. I do not think it is possible for domestic architecture to be beautiful.*”

Eighty two years later the same can be said of so much of what now passes as contemporary architecture. As well, “*all that is most pulverising in modern machinery*” is now being used increasingly in Hunters Hill on land where the use of such machinery was once prohibitively expensive.

Kerry and Lindsay Clare

To carve up the site to suit the design, rather than designing to suit the site is disastrous for the preservation of the character of a place. So it is heartening to see that the Australian Institute of Architects has this year awarded its highest accolade, the gold medal, to Kerry and Lindsay Clare who are exemplars of sensitive site design. This photo of a house they designed in 1986 epitomises their approach. Note the lightness of the structure, its modest size, how its impact on the site is minimal and how many trees have been preserved, even those very close to the building. This is exactly the sort of house that should be encouraged and possibly mandated for sensitive and steep sites like those running down to the Lane Cove River.



Clare House



Preserving Australia’s
Oldest Garden Suburb

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OLD HOUSES ARE ENVIRONMENTALLY-FRIENDLY

Kate Clark

S.M.H., January 4, 2010

I was recently in Hay in a heatwave visiting Bishops Lodge. Built in 1888, the iron house was designed by the architect John Sulman to combat the Riverina summer heat.

On one of the hottest days this year, the interior of the house felt cool, despite it being built of lightweight corrugated iron and bereft of air-conditioning. Its deep verandas shaded the rooms, its shutters kept out direct sunlight, and natural Cyprus pine sawdust packed its walls and improved the insulation.

Often built at a time when energy was expensive, older buildings use natural heating, cooling, light and ventilation. They do not rely on the grid to let occupants cope with the heat because they have windows that open, and a smaller ratio of glass-to-walls, which reduces the temperature increase inside. Deep verandas cool older houses and wider overhangs minimise heat from the sun. Living rooms on the first floors of Victorian terraces often catch the breeze and escape radiant heat from the ground.

The Bureau of Statistics tells us that one in seven houses built in Australia simply replaces an existing house. Not only will the demolished house have been smaller, it will have consumed less energy. Think of all the energy that goes into those new buildings replacing the old. The building industry is a significant contributor to global resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, along with household energy use.

Building construction consumes 32 per cent of the world's resources, including 12 per cent of its water and 40 per cent of its energy.

Buildings also produce 40 per cent of the waste that goes to landfill dumps and 40 per cent of air emissions. Household energy use contributes about 9.5 per cent of Australia's total greenhouse emissions.

Left unchecked, the energy consumption of our building industry and housing seem destined to continue to rise. Not only has the average floor area of new dwellings increased by about a third since 1986-87 but the number of people in each dwelling has reduced. We build the largest houses in the world - 44 per cent bigger than they were a quarter of a century ago.

Concrete production alone has increased 400 per cent since 1970 - accounting for an estimated 6 per cent of human-related carbon emissions. Home builders often claim their new buildings are more

energy efficient but older houses have a role to play in retaining Australian heritage and reducing our emissions.

A study by the British Empty Homes Agency, /New Tricks with Old Bricks/, estimates that reusing empty homes could save 35 tonnes of carbon dioxide a property by removing the need for the energy expended on new building materials and construction.

They compared old and new buildings and found that not only did older buildings emit less carbon dioxide, but even a well-insulated new home would take several decades to make up for the large amount of embodied carbon dioxide used in its construction.

It is time to rethink our love of new homes and rediscover the old. And if you must build new, there are significant lessons to be learnt from the past. There is no better place to start than traditional bush architecture, and its construction techniques have never more relevant.

Think of corrugated iron. It is low maintenance, durable and recyclable. Add a veranda for natural ventilation and shading. Collect and store water from large roofs. Consider using earth in building, with its minimal embodied energy and heat storing thermal mass. Use timber - the most common frontier building material now recognised as a carbon-capturing renewable resource with low embodied energy and excellent insulation.

Being environmentally responsible begins at home. Old houses, as well as their potential heritage significance, have immense value environmentally as well as historically. If you seek proof, call in to Australia's oldest surviving homestead, Elizabeth Farm, at Parramatta. On a warm day, sit on its cool, shady veranda and understand that old and green belong together.

Kate Clark is the current Director of the Historic Houses Trust, She was appointed in October 2008 after 25 years of heritage-related work in the UK. Kate's expertise includes evaluating the economic and social benefits of heritage conservation, including historic buildings and industrial and landscape archaeology. She has agreed for us to publish this article she wrote for the Herald a few months ago, and also to be our guest speaker at this year's Trust Christmas Party.

PROTECTING TREES ON BUILDING SITES

Brigid Dowsett

Appropos the discussion of the destruction of mature trees in the adjoining article, I undertook to discover what guidelines for tree protection are currently available.

A new Australian Standard - AS4970-2009 Protection of trees on development sites - was published last August. Long overdue, it was developed for the protection and preservation of trees on construction sites and recognises the range of vital social and environmental benefits provided by trees in our urban communities.

A closely-related British Standard was the starting

point, but scientific research, plant biology and a study of current practices informed the development of this new Standard. Arborists, architects, planners, building developers, and all those responsible for the care and protection of the trees to be retained and integrated into construction projects, now have a uniform and agreed framework for best practice at every stage of the development process. An important requirement of the Standard is that procedures must be in place to protect trees from the very earliest design stage through to completion of work.

As we have all observed, trees and their root systems damaged during construction often never recover from high level stress or injury, and mature landmark and habitat trees can be killed in a short space of time, significantly depleting our local environment's amenity and its native wildlife. It is essential that this Standard is comprehensively and consistently applied in order to control loss of the 'urban forest' due to development. Let's hope Hunters Hill Council makes use of it in future.



So far so good - a building site in Auburn Street.

FORESHORE DESTRUCTION AT BONNEFIN ROAD

Back in 2003 there was a Development Application lodged with Hunters Hill Council for the demolition of an existing cottage and the subdivision of the block at 39 Bonnefin Road for two new houses. Council refused the application and the applicant appealed to the Land and Environment Court. The Trust made a detailed submission pointing out how the subdivision would have a detrimental impact on the bushland character of the site and involve the destruction of a number of large trees. The Trust was an objector in the court.

The Court dismissed the appeal and in his judgement Commissioner Hoffman found that a number of issues were "determinative and sufficient for refusal of the proposal".

The issues included the following:

- The proposal would have an adverse visual impact on the locality in particular it "will detract from the identity of the municipality of Hunters Hill and have a detrimental impact on the topography of the subject site and cause an adverse impact on the foreshore and riverscape when viewed from Lane Cove River and surrounding public and private areas.
- That it does not comply with or satisfy the objectives of Hunters Hill's LEP, LEP or SREP (Sydney Harbour Catchment) 2005.
- That the proposal sets an undesirable precedent in terms of loss of existing vegetation and natural rock features.
- The proposal will "significantly impact on the site's existing scenic and environmental values".
- The proposal will require the removal of and significant adverse impacts on trees and vegetation.

Council subsequently approved a new application to build a single dwelling on the site. This application included the retention of a number of existing mature trees.

For the last couple of months huge excavators have been continuously working on the site. The demolition and excavation work that has taken place flies in the face of all the reasons given for the refusal of the 2003 development application. It is as though they were mandatory requirements instead of reasons for refusal.

As well, a cursory examination of the DA shows that there are a number of things that have already happened that do not appear to be accordance with the original development approval. These are:

- Removal of trees and foliage shown on the DA documents to be retained
- Poor protection of the existing large trees still standing on the site and shown on the DA to be retained.



Before

- Damage to their existing of root systems of these trees by the excavation and the use of very large tracked excavators in their vicinity, which makes their continuing existence questionable.
- Excavation of sandstone bedrock in excess of what was approved.
- The construction of a new boulder style retaining wall, which does not relate to what was shown on the approved DA drawings and which is out of character with the existing dry stone walls in the area.
- The possibility that the retaining wall has been built much closer to the mean high water mark than what was approved on the DA plans as a result of its design.

The Trust notified the Private Certifier and Hunters Hill Council about its concerns and subsequently Council has requested an investigation of the situation.

There is a desperate and urgent need for Council to consider ways of preventing this level of foreshore destruction happening again, particularly in Bonnefin Road where the existing bush character of the foreshore is its outstanding feature. Here the riverscape is under pressure from new owners wanting to knock down a number of existing small cottages that have been allowed to fall into disrepair. These new developments will include swimming pools, cabanas and man-made terraces on the waterfront.

This is already happening. For example, extensive new work, including a pool, cabana, concrete block retaining walls and paved decks, is currently under construction at the eastern end of the street on a block that was previously bushland. For the time being this new work is not particularly visible from the river because of a couple of large trees within the foreshore protection zone.

However its immediate neighbours are not so well shielded from the impact of this development and their existing amenity has been detrimentally affected. As well, the future of the trees is questionable because retaining walls and drainage works have been built very close to them.

Of course there also remains the threat to the riverscape from the deliberate poisoning and unauthorised removal of existing trees and undergrowth. I have previously notified Council about such activity in Bonnefin Road but it is clearly too late once the trees have gone and difficult to prosecute when the perpetrators are not caught in the act.

Council is to be commended for requesting an investigation of work at No 39. Lets hope that close scrutiny is given to any future developments for their impact on the riverscape.



After

FROM THE PRESIDENT’S DESKTOP (continued)

Le Corbusier

Another book I have been reading in preparation for a trip to France next month is *The Architecture of Paris* by Andrew Ayers. We’re planning to make a pilgrimage to Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, a house that has had as powerful an influence on the Modern Movement as Mies Van der Rohe’s Farnsworth House. Villa Savoye was built between 1928 and 1931 (contemporaneous with Evelyn Waugh’s novel) as a weekend summer home for a wealthy couple. Ayers writes, “*To this prosaic brief Corb brought all the technical, organisational and aesthetic innovation with which he hoped to revolutionise not just architecture but society’s whole way of living*”.

However, like the Farnsworth House, it proved to be “*a dwelling that was, in the end, uninhabitable. Uncomfortably cold and damp due to heating and rainwater drainage, the house was abandoned by its owners after only a few years*”. It “*was scheduled for demolition in the 1950s. Only the intervention of the then culture minister Andre Malraux, alerted by concerned aficionados, saved it from destruction.*”



Villa Savoye

The automobile

Ayers writes that, “*It was the magic machine-age invention par excellence, the automobile, that made weekend villa dwelling possible, and Corb paid it tribute in the very design of the house.*”

A double driveway leads up to the villa allowing cars to progress under its pilotis-mounted overhang and deposit passengers at the front door.” The whole of the ground floor is given over to the car and there is no connection at the ground level for living rooms and garden.

So when, on a visit the Rose Seidler house, you wonder why the carport occupies the best corner of the house, or next time you ponder the aesthetics of having the street elevation of a McMansion dominated by a triple car garage door - remember Le Corbusier and Modernism’s fascination with the automobile.

Hunters Hill Public School

Modernist architects continue to be fascinated by the prefabricated structure – the idea of a building as a factory-produced item that can be plonked down anywhere.


This is exactly what we are getting at Hunters Hill Public School. Rather than a site-specific building of excellence we will be getting, thanks to the Federal Government’s **Building the Education Revolution**, a “cookie cutter” design for a two-storey classroom block, which will be plonked into Hunters Hill’s most important heritage precinct.

There was a cursory heritage impact statement prepared by Tanner Architects but it was incomplete and made no assessment of the impact of the new building on adjacent heritage items and did not make any analysis of its impact on the conservation area.

Compared to the existing buildings, the new classroom block is large in bulk and scale. Its materials are unsympathetic to the adjacent heritage buildings in the school grounds or other heritage items in the precinct. As well, because of the demolition of two existing single storey buildings, the new building will be visible from Stanley Street and have a major impact on the appearance of the site from that direction

Bovis Lend Lease, the builders, made a token, non-binding submission to Council. Consequently Council’s Conservation Advisory Panel, made number of modest suggestions as to how to reduce the impact of the proposed building. To date there has been no indication that Bovis Lend Lease will take up any of these suggestions.

Andrew Ayers – The Architecture of Paris (Edition Axel Menges, 2004)



ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

FRIDAY 30th APRIL at 7.30 at the RSL HALL

If you've missed our official notice, here's another reminder about our AGM .
It includes an illustrated talk by Greg Blaxall and refreshments. Visitors welcome.

