

‘From Home to Museum’ Exhibition, Willoughby Museum

Exhibition opening speech, Dr Scott Robertson, 21 April 2013

Introduction

I have been involved with the conservation areas in Willoughby since 1982 when I was one of four members of the National Trust’s Urban Conservation Committee that surveyed the parts of the Lower North Shore. Under the committee’s chairman and survey group leader, Stephen Harris from the School of Town Planning at the UNSW, we surveyed Chatswood and Mosman (1982), Naremburn (1983), Artarmon (1989) and Crows Nest Road in North Sydney (1991). These areas were subsequently listed by the National Trust Council as Urban Conservation Areas (UCAs).

Likewise nearly all the areas I identified in Sydney, Newcastle and Orange as potential UCAs representative of the interwar period were also listed by the National Trust. Most of these conservation areas listed by the National Trust have found their way into Local Environmental Plans as statutory Heritage Conservation Areas (HCAs). One of the glaring exceptions was in the Local Government Area (LGA) of Ku-ring-gai where the council dragged its heels in assessing the areas and, by the time they had decided to propose HCAs, the (Labor) State Government stepped in to prevent it.

Willoughby City Council was more diligent in undertaking its own surveys of the areas listed by the National Trust and all the Federation UCAs and some of the interwar UCAs have subsequently been listed as HCAs on the Willoughby Local Environmental Plan (LEP). An interesting exception to this was my proposed Northbridge UCA. When I surveyed the area in the early 1990s, it was largely intact as a representative collection of interwar bungalows and villas. The proposed statutory listing of Northbridge was vehemently opposed by the residents and I remember having to front a hostile meeting of residents during the public consultation process. As a result, Northbridge was not listed as an HCA and, in my opinion, it has been ruined by unsympathetic, over-scaled additions and large new replacement houses. In short, self-interest triumphed over the common, community good.

Why conservation areas?

Conservation areas are the physical embodiment of a period or periods of historical development. As such they provide a tangible indicator of intangible history.

They usually also possess a continuity and harmony in their townscape and streetscape through the similarity of scale and massing, architectural treatment (including materials and colours) and street and garden planting.

They also provide settings for the larger, grander houses, sometimes of earlier periods where large estates were subdivided, that provide a sympathetic setting for those architectural and historical jewels. I find one of the greatest problems in town planning is the identification of heritage buildings as isolated jewels surrounded by much later, higher density development. It makes no sense to me and yet this process still continues. Ku-ring-gai being but one example of areas upzoned and upscaled by unthinking government and forcing those in heritage items to be surrounded by five storey buildings that overshadow and overlook them. Conservation areas avoid this by instituting controls to maintain scale and character of the built fabric.

The similar scale of the buildings and the fact that planning controls affect everyone in a conservation area is a democratic approach as everyone is required to conform to what the community expects, and has previously agreed to) as the way in which the area is to change and go forth into the future. On one hand this engenders a sense of community and, on the other, critics see this as conformity and lack of creativity. Moreover, the state government (and developers and their lobby groups) consider conservation areas to be impediments to development (just look at the Labor state government's actions in Ku-ring-gai as an example).

Willoughby City seems to have the balance right. We have conservation areas and also areas for development near railway stations and along bus routes. Moreover, when you observe the rate and type of change in Willoughby's conservation areas compared to suburbs outside the conservation areas you can see that the controls in the conservation areas have maintained a more coherent townscape. In addition, values of properties within conservation areas are usually higher than comparable properties outside those conservation areas. This is because of the certainty of the planning process due to the community-established planning controls.

Importance of this exhibition

This exhibition is important for a number of reasons:

- 1) It reveals the layers of development in the South Chatswood Conservation Area.
- 2) It informs future decisions for planning an area (ie knowledge of the past allows us to take into consideration the history, heritage, and the things we want to keep in an area).
- 3) It allows young members of the community (and older members who may be entrusted with the future of the area but who have no inclination towards history) to learn of the past so that the present of the area can be understood and so that desires for the future can grow out of that knowledge of the past rather than blithely destroying the past and the community's roots.

Such a knowledgeable and understanding public is even more vital under the proposed change to the NSW planning system currently in White Paper (and draft legislative form). The new system

empowers the community to plan the future of their areas in the initial stage with the trade-off that the community will then be forbidden to have a say when specific developments are proposed in the future. On past performance I would say this is a system designed to provide higher density, pro-development outcomes. I cannot imagine the state government allowing any community to say they do not want any upscaling of development. The pressures of population growth, the costs of services and the provision of transport infrastructure demand that existing areas of Sydney will face increasing redevelopment challenges.

Therefore any initiative such as this exhibition that engages the general public in a conversation about history, heritage, the built environment and development is vital if the community is to make informed choices in the upcoming public consultation about the future city.

In addition, such exhibitions offer a window into the past; a past that sometimes seems like a foreign land, exotic in its distance from today's overcrowding, congestion and concerns. And yet, the past is not a foreign land. Our forebears, as depicted here in this exhibition, had the same problems, hopes and desires. They wanted better transport, a healthy home environment in a garden setting in order to raise their families away from the noxious smells and miasmas of poorly serviced inner city residential areas. They wanted access to education, they wanted parks, ovals and cricket grounds to permit the local teams to compete, they wanted theatres for the performance of plays, and later the screening of films, and they constructed churches to round out the moral framework of society.

As an architect I can appreciate the physical aspects and details of these houses but I know that these buildings, streets and conservation areas also form the stage and backdrop of people's lives. However, as an architect, I believe that if we take the view that our physical environment is only a backdrop to the real purpose of social continuity we open ourselves to the danger of developers and their consultants making claims that if we document and record the physical evidence of our society then it is an acceptable heritage outcome to demolish that environment. I have seen a number of heritage consultants' reports that make such claims.

Without the physical, tangible and visible evidence Heritage becomes History (and usually a wordy, picture-less history at that). The physical markers of history that are embodied in our tangible, physical, visible environment are of utmost importance. In this respect this exhibition is one of those contributions to not just recording the past but helping to preserve the past into the future.

I am very honoured and pleased to be able to open this exhibition.

Congratulations and may there be many more.