

Castlecrag Forum
“Keeping Castlecrag Special”
26th October 2004, at Castlecrag

Notes taken by L Cairnes

TERRY FOGARTY (DEPUTY MAYOR OF WILLOUGHBY AND FORUM CHAIR)

Councillor Fogarty welcomed the attendees and noted that Castlecrag was featured prominently in Willoughby Council’s entry in the international “Liveable Cities” competition, the winners of which were announced in Vancouver Canada this month. Castlecrag identities Gay Spies and Howard Rubie were featured in the video presentation promoting the City of Willoughby.

BOB CLARK (XXXXX)

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT CASTLECRAG?

Castlecrag is a peninsular with a large area of foreshore to Sydney Harbour.

Sydney Harbour has generated much of the image of Sydney. It is a drowned valley, incised into the sandstone rock and recognised as one of the world’s finest harbours. The first European settlers in Australia drew their water from creeks in the coves of the Harbour. The Harbour was seen then as being defensible, with two main arms – the north and the south.

Sydney is a “sandstone city”, built from sandstone laid down 230 million years ago. Although the soils derived from erosion of the sandstone are poor in quality, the bushland that grows here supports a rich plant and fauna diversity.

Each of the harbour’s arms has its own special character.

Middle Harbour, where Castlecrag is located, has a fjord-like scenic quality, which has been recognised by listing by the National Trust and in a nomination to the Register of the National Estate.

These values were appreciated by Walter Burley Griffin, who related his subdivision patterns to the bays, coves, headlands and valleys.

In Castlecrag, the landscaped tree cover dominated the built form. IT was Griffin’s intention to preserve this ratio.

In many parts of Sydney, sandstone is evident in built structures (Hunters Hill, Balmain), and the suburbs on harbour peninsulas are special – e.g. Mosman, Castlecrag, Hunters Hill. These areas typically have serpentine roads winding around the hill slopes, with sandstone outcrops, sandstone building walls, cuttings and road edges. The sandstone has a special tactile quality.

Views

From many parts of Castlecrag, the views out are important. There are glimpses of the harbour out from the ridges (the dominant ridge is defined by Edinburgh Road), the winding roads, the Northern Escarpment – through carports, over rooftops. The design with nature characteristic of Castlecrag harks back to the Sydney School design philosophy, where even quite large buildings can be tucked into the landscape if carefully sited. However, it is symptomatic of modern development trends that the buildings of Castlecrag are being replaced by much larger buildings.

Because of Castlecrag's special qualities, landscape and history, it is important that it doesn't look the same as other developed headlands around Sydney Harbour. It should merge into the wonderful fjord-like waterways.

The key issues for keeping these special qualities are scale, design and tree cover.

Trees frame views, and views IN are as important as views OUT. It is important to be sensitive to the landscape of the area viewed from the water and surrounding reserves

There are pressures for change because Sydney's growth continues and people want to live near the harbour

Therefore there are great pressures mounting on all of Sydney and particularly its foreshore areas.

What we do now in these areas will have a major future impact.

It is best to understand and build with the local character, which differentiates Castlecrag from other places – which makes people who know it say affectionately "Ah, Castlecrag!".

PROFESSOR JAMES WEIRWICK

UNIVERSITY OF NSW

THE SPECIAL CHARACTER OF CASTLECRAG – THE GRIFFIN LEGACY

The area that today is the Griffin Conservation Area in Castlecrag was the Griffin Estate and the Haven Estate.

In 1920s, Griffin's development company bought 650 acres including the Castlecrag area, plus all of Middle Cove and two-thirds of Castle Cove. So, with the development of Castlecrag, only part of Griffin's great vision was completed. He tried later to acquire the Northern Escarpment and Cape Estate.

The development character of Castlecrag may be described as ridge roads, with blocks of land to high water mark. Griffin made a gift of foreshore and bushland reserves for the whole community. These aspects set the fundamental structure for development.

After World War II, CCC and SPA planners commenced a County Open Space program for Sydney, which included buying back previously subdivided land including Harold Reid Reserve lands. The Griffins had set the fundamental way of thinking about development which included winding roads, retaining d=significant trees, and careful siting of houses. Today's Conservation Area is protected by a Development Control Plan (DCP19 and its amendments).

The significant features of Castlecrag include nationally and internationally recognised advances in urban development which:

- respects the landscape character
- allows sharing of views
- encompasses design and design processes that are aimed at conserving the landscape quality, sense of community and social connections
- retains public vistas
- has built form subordinate to the natural landscape.

The values of the area are not just the Griffin architecture, but modern interpretation of the same principles, where houses are below the tree canopy – “an incident in the landscape”.

Many others have valued the qualities of Castlecrag, such as Max Dupain, photographer (1940s, early 1950s).

In the early days before housing development, the ridge tops had been denuded if timber, and bush rock and heath had gone. The bush has changed as the climate of Sydney has changed in the last 80 years, the vegetation has become more “mesic” (the environmental and soil conditions are medium, regarding moisture, rather than very dry).

With new dwellings being constructed and inhabited, renewed landscapes were deliberately created (e.g., the Moon House) to restore a vegetated landscape.

In Mason City, Iowa, USA, it is possible to visit a site where the Griffins built a housing on 20 acres. Today, there are houses and a flowing landscape without fences. The larger landscape is the pervading unifying theme, based on continuity and integrity.

The repeated theme in Castlecrag is the landscape, roads that are small in scale (perhaps inspired by the ancient roads of Japan).

The central theme is that the buildings are subordinate to the landscape.

Techniques that have been used to achieve this (see 15 The Citadel) include disaggregated elements and integration with the garden and reserve around it. It has been demonstrated on many sites that the Griffin aims are still relevant and possible: “everyone can have a view if everyone co-operates”.

There is still, in Castlecrag, a sense of continuity with the Griffin philosophy, and that is why the place is significant. The houses that have been built at other later times have

been done in other ways, but still the bushland exists which filters the views of the buildings.

There has always been a great diversity of community in Castlecrag, but still the fundamental social ideal remains. Some special focuses bind the community together. The Amphitheatre was recreated in 1976 by local people to honour the century of Griffin's birth, and is now in regular use for community events.

Castlecrag demands a very deep understanding of the principles on which its development was based. There are pressures for change: for example, Dupain lived in a tiny house across two lots, and there is now intense pressure for its redevelopment. Where there was once a glazed opening between two houses, a major addition was built that was unfortunately not at all subservient to the environment and landscape.

There is now pressure for larger houses on smaller blocks. There is the choice to keep the canopy of trees, but trees need space. The whole community enjoys and celebrates these values.

JOHN MCINERNY

Deputy Lord Mayor of Sydney and past President of the Planning Institute of Australia.

THE FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONSERVATION

John's past has included many contacts with the Griffins and places they designed. He said "I feel compelled to continue to return to Castlecrag and visit the community which has the privilege to live there".

The Griffins are classed as one of the most important Australian influences in urban design, and there is increasing international interest in the Castlecrag area.

Financial implications

The Conservation Area has planning controls to conserve and protect the quality and character of the area, recognising heritage items as something important to conserve. This is another layer of development controls on top of the ordinary controls.

Individual items – Vs – conservation areas:

Area controls and building/ item controls are quite different to each other.

There is no doubt that a conservation area classification does add value. In Ku-ring-gai, there are 12% higher prices in a conservation area compared with equivalent properties outside the conservation area. Hockings said that the development controls of a conservation area "add certainty". Council planning processes create the network of controls that result in conserving the specific and unique environment that is valued. Values of properties will increase at a faster rate than those in non-conservation areas. The NSW Heritage Council document "*Heritage Listing – benefits for owners*" states "people purchase heritage buildings because they like them." The document emphasises that heritage listing does not preclude changes.

Some agents say that heritage properties are easiest to sell and bring the best prices – unless the property is the only heritage item in the street. Isolated listed places may not appreciate as fast, although an individual heritage listing may improve the value, and should not restrict the owners too much- restrictions should be the minimum necessary to conserve the item’s values.

The development controls need to be clear, unequivocal and rigorously enforced.

John Milne said “. . . all that makes existence possible is the enforcement of constraints on other people”.

“Character” and how to conserve it

Good architects can work successfully within the urban design framework for new buildings, there are many examples in Paddington.

In Castlecrag, the Griffin Conservation Area has DCP 19, [quote] “. . . to conserve the basic principles . . .the most important is the subordination of buildings to landscape”. This clearly describes the character and the minimum controls to achieve the objective. This is a good DCP. Its intention is a re-statement of Griffin’s vision, and correction of some of the mistakes of the 1950s and 1960s. Replacement buildings can be an opportunity to reinstate the vision, and are not an opportunity to repeat past mistakes. This is not an argument against modern architecture, as long as it carries forward the vision.

PETER MOFFITT

ARCHITECT, CASTLECRAG

Peter acknowledged the advice of Linda McLure (Willoughby Council) who provided some of the information for his presentation.

There are over 200 heritage items listed in the Local Government area of Willoughby. There are many types of heritage items – not just buildings.

In a review in 2001, there were 50 properties nominated. This is part of the normal LEP process.

How does heritage listing affect a property owner?

There is little change if a property is heritage-listed. A property owner can sell, rent, and maintain the property in the normal way – no special approvals are needed. A development application is needed for alterations and additions and this is the process to allow consideration of the potential impact on the significant values of the listed item.

There is usually no problem with such actions as updating bathrooms. And a property owner can apply for a Valuer General’s heritage restricted value on a listed property.

GREG WOODHAMS

WILLOUGHBY CITY COUNCIL

PLANNING CONTROLS AND DCPS

The plan-making process provides the means to enunciate the values through planning controls.

Willoughby LEP lists 2650 properties as having heritage significance, for various reasons. There are incentives and constraints affecting heritage items.

The Griffin Conservation Area has its future desired character clearly enunciated. It can be difficult to communicate what the words in a planning instrument mean.

Staff in Willoughby Council are trained in understanding Castlecrag and its particular issues and values.

DCP 16 applies across Willoughby LGA, and deals with the general issues such as views, privacy etc.. It also applies to Castlecrag.

DCP 25 states the developments for which you don't need Council consent.

DCP 19 applies specifically to the Griffin Conservation Area.

So . . . there are three documents that are the rules for Castlecrag: DCPs 16, 19, and 25.

Design Guidelines are normally more detailed.

At the "pointy end"! Advice: to avoid anger and confusion, consult Council early in the process – or you will fail. Nine out of ten people who do not consult will fail in their application and receive a refusal.

A heritage Impact Statement is relatively simple and should be prepared in the standard format (there is a 4-page form).

Lodge the DA

It then goes to Council through the normal process: through Council heritage experts, engineers, planners, and possibly external experts, if it is a State Heritage Item.

Neighbours are notified, and issues to negotiate are identified before a report to Council is prepared.

If there are less than 4 submissions, the report and decision can be done by a Council Officer. There are no 3rd party appeals rights. The decision is followed by issue of a construction certificate, with or without S. 96 modifications for small amendments.

There are mandatory inspections which may be done by a Council or private certifier.

Involvement of community: Willoughby community is active and this leads to richness of planning instruments.

Hints for applicants:

- 1 It is important to ask a designer or architect to read the DCPs
- 2 Talk to the neighbours

- 3 Have patience with Council and the process – the average time to process an application is 50-60 days; if it is complex it may take 6-12 months.
- 4 Keep in touch with Council Officers throughout the process.

It is difficult for a Council to make a good DCP. DCP 19 had 20 drafts, many inputs, and every need was examined, many changes made. The DCP as made now reflects the views of the wider community.