

Australia's Phoenix - The Re-emergence of First Government House

by Helen Temple
Archaeologist

Introduction

The two hundredth anniversary of British colonial settlement in Australia will be celebrated in 1988 and an appropriate focus of attention is the remains of Australia's first permanent building, the residence and offices of the colonial governors. This was the nucleus of settlement and the site, miraculously undeveloped for the past 150 years has recently been rediscovered in the heart of downtown Sydney.

First Government House Site has been championed by a variety of professional and community interest groups. In 1983 the New South Wales State Government public committed itself to preserving the site by releasing a private company from an Aus. \$100 million development contract. Now, in an interesting conservation solution it proposes to sell and transfer the development rights above the historic site and create a development with two foci, a commemorative centre and commercial tower. A design embracing the specific and complex problems of the site will be produced through a prestigious architectural competition. A resolution is being sought for a plethora of multi-disciplinary issues including : site-specific material conservation problems; the public expectation and political commitment for the remains to be accessible; the challenges of successful site-interpretation, and the need for a design solution that is sensitive to the surrounding historic buildings.

The site has become a cultural totem. Throughout the world archaeological sites have been conserved and incorporated into contemporary urban environments, including 'Benjamin Franklin's House in Philadelphia, Jorvik' in York, England. La Crypte Archeologique, Paris and the Roman Museum in Merida in Spain. Comparison of these with Australia's first such experiment proves to be very exciting.

History and Significance

Construction of Government House began 4 months after the arrival of the First Fleet from Britain in 1788. It held a commanding position in the settlement, a symbol of authority so essential in a penal colony. The simple Georgian vernacular building was stone and brick, a rare luxury in a colony of sparse resources. Before it stood a garden, and at the rear, extended clusters of outbuildings.

By 1845 the house had grown haphazardly, reflecting the whims of successive vice-regal occupants. The building was unsound and to the flourishing 19th century colony, embarrassingly unfashionable. Following its demolition in 1845, the street grid was extended through the site. Remarkably, much of the site has remained undisturbed. The front portion of the main building lies beneath the successive road surfaces, but the majority of the remainder has supported only a series of temporary buildings.

Although it was disparagingly discarded, First Government House was the focus of Government for the colony's first and hardest 57 years. The site has historical, scientific and social significance and it provides a direct and tangible link to the origins of colonial Australian settlement.

Investigative Programme

By 1982 this empty, Government-owned inner-city block was a prime building site. Even the National Trust had advocated its development in a last-ditch attempt to rescue an adjacent historic building. A lease was let for high-rise development but construction was delayed by the Department of Environment and Planning pending a staged historical and archaeological investigation of the site. Today this initiative is unremarkable but it set a precedent in N.S.W. for site investigations.

Historical research analyzed the history and significance of the site and set up a predictive model of where physical remains might be located. (Proudfoot, 1983). A brief exploratory excavation revealed the back wall of the 1788 house and there began the most controversial excavation in Australia's history. (Bickford 1983)

The first two seasons of excavation could be likened to a military operation. Trying not to attract public attention, the work was undertaken behind a high fence and the position of the trenches was determined more by the location of the proposed development than by an archaeological research design. News leaked out, a lobby group formed and conservation of the fragile remains became a major issue culminating in a large public rally, the first demonstration of support for an archaeological site in Australia. Ultimately the Government released the developers from their commitments and announced that the site would be conserved for future generations.

The dig produced tantalizing glimpses of early colonial life, and material representing the full occupation history of the site. The 1788 foundations were characterised by brick and stone foundations 80cm thick, bonded simply with pipe clay because no lime was available to make mortar. The thickness of these walls led historians to conject, not on the uncertainty of those colonial builders, but on the expressive symbolism of that first cottage, proclaiming the authority of the central administration. (Bickford 1984) One of the most exciting groups of artefacts found were forty six pieces of lead type from the Government Printing Office, now known to be part of the press sent on the first fleet in 1788. (Blair, 1985)

The Conservation Process

An extra-ordinary site with extra-ordinary needs requires an extra-ordinary solution. The problems facing those responsible for the project are diverse:

- * Only the rear 50% of the first government buildings are available for interpretive purposes. Half of the main building lies beneath the roads which bound the available land on two sides. Although the question of road closures has not been rejected, this is not a short term option.
- * The surviving archaeological remains are fragile, fragmentary and do not survive to any great depth. To the layman, their physical appearance may not commensurate with their cultural significance. Imaginative and tangential approaches to site interpretation are essential.
- * There is a public expectation, and a political commitment, that the remains will be on view. Apart from the interpretation challenge this provides, a controlled environment, including humidity, ground water and salt movement, is essential if the processes of decay is to be effectively slowed. This necessitates erection of a protective structure. Specialist conservation advice indicates that even for a low scale structure, construction activity should not occur within a 2 metre curtilage of the footings. (Conybeare et al 1987) This is a real challenge in view of the distribution of the archaeological features.
- * Any interpretation programme needs to address the different significance the site has for black and white Australians. On the one hand, it marks what some may see as the beginning of European interference and the alteration of a traditional culture, and on the other and it symbolises 18th-Century scientific inquiry and the foundation of a successful colonial enterprise.
- * Finally First Government House is an archaeological site in the heart of a major city. Its conservation needs are multi-disciplinary, including materials conservation, urban design, site-interpretation and structural engineering. However there is still a tendency to see the problem myopically as solely an architectural problem, the panacea for which is to create a monumental design commensurate with the cultural significance of the site and, most importantly, providing excellence in infill design.

Once the decision was made to conserve the site, two conservation documents were prepared; a Conservation Plan for the site and Development Parameters for adjacent sites. This is in accordance with 'ICOMOS' Australia's Burra Charter Guidelines (a derivation of the Venice Charter, hand-tailored to meet local needs). This approach is becoming standard conservation practice. The aim of a Conservation Plan is to establish significance and set out the recommended conservation action based on an assessment of the site-specific constraints and opportunities.

The First Government House Conservation Plan outlined four "development" options, ranging from a low-key landscape solution to a medium-rise museum development of approximately six stories. The recommended option was a low-scale structure with modest bulk complementing the surrounding historic buildings. This would create an interpretation centre providing for display of the remains within a temperature controlled environment. The estimated cost was AUS \$16 million. In this current period of financial restraint, the Government would not entertain such a costly option, and other funding avenues have been investigated. This notwithstanding, the conservation requirements for the site, embodied in the report will guide any further development.

The Resolution:

Having made repeated public commitments to conserve the site, but at the same time trying to curb expenditure, the Government is now canvassing a novel mechanism for financing the project. It is proposed to transfer the maximum development rights from the site and the two adjoining historic terrace houses (all currently in public ownership) to an adjacent, privately-owned development site. In exchange for a sizeable capital sum, the private landowner will be able to realise, through additional floors in a high rise tower, a much higher floor space ratio than would normally be permitted by the existing planning controls. This will provide the Government with sufficient capital to create its promised commemorative centre and to establish a Trust Fund to pay for the Centre's ongoing care and management.

To ensure that the high-rise development respects and does not overwhelm the historic precinct, a unified development is proposed with two foci—the commemorative centre and, with a different orientation, the high rise tower. This would be achieved through a Government/private enterprise consortium. Finally, in order to achieve excellence in design for this highly specialised conservation problem, the joint development will be the subject of a prestigious architectural competition, with carefully designed conservation specifications tied in with the Conservation Plan and Development Parameters mentioned above.

The aim of the project is to conserve, enhance and interpret the remains of First Government House; to create an appropriate environment on the site which realises its instructive and evocative potential, and to create an amenity which allows for reflection on its role in Australia's history.

Indirectly then, the owner of the adjacent commercial property would finance the conservation of the historic site, construction of the interpretive facilities, establishment of a management Trust Fund, and the holding of a major competition. If this proposal goes ahead, as it is likely to, the competition will be launched as the most important for a building in Sydney since the Opera House.

While the development proposal must be pragmatically viewed with a degree of caution, it may provide a very special opportunity to conserve and interpret one of Australia's most symbolic sites with as much tangential experimentation as is visible in Robert

Venturi's treatment of Benjamin Franklin's House, Philadelphia, created more than 15 years ago.

The one area that still requires attention in all this careful planning is site interpretation. The primary significance of the site is symbolic. It is imperative that the symbol be explained - the site brought to life. The final success of the project will depend to a large extent on the public success of the site's interpretation.

Conclusion

The First Government House project is a major conservation initiative, which is presenting a variety of challenges not previously faced in Australia. The State Government is to be commended for its commitment to the site and kudos for the imaginative way it proposes to solve the conservation issues and provide the requisite finance. The muted approach clearly has broadbased application, in a time of economic stringency, and when conservation practitioners are seeking out revolutionary ways of approaching age-old problems. It is appropriate that the First Government House solution is aired for discussion at an ICOMOS conference.

Meanwhile the First Government House project will continue and if all the issues on this site can be creatively resolved, then Australia's Phoenix may take its place amongst the short list of similarly successful, if experimental, projects throughout the world.

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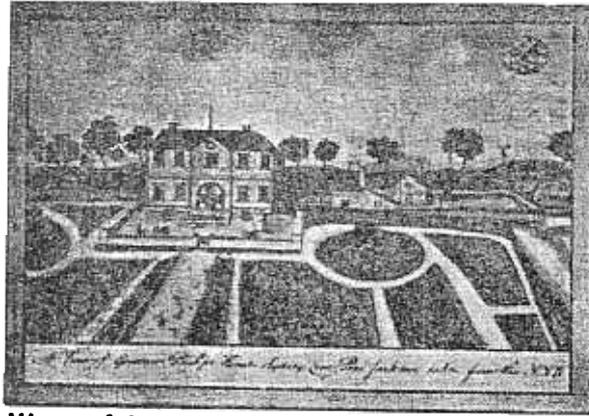
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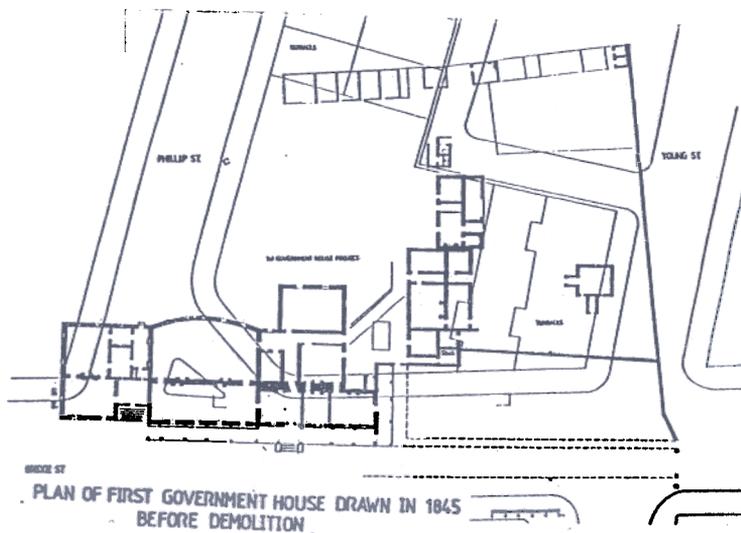
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View of house c.1790 Artist unknown



View of house 1836 Charles Rodius.



Le Phenix d'Australie: la Réapparition de la premiere Residence des Gouverneurs Coloniaux

Helen Temple
Archéologue

Le bicentenaire de l'arrivée des premiers colons Britanniques en Australie sera célèbre en 1988 et à cette occasion un centre d'attention vous est naturellement fourni par les fondations du premier édifice permanent d'Australie - la résidence et les bureaux des gouverneurs coloniaux: ce fût-la le noyau de la colonie.

L'emplacement, miraculeusement non développé pendant les dernières 150 années a été récemment retrouvé au coeur de Sydney.

Plusieurs groupes, professionnels et publiques, se sont montrés très actifs pour préserver cet emplacement. En 1983, le Gouvernement de Nouvelle Galle du Sud a fait connaître son intention de préserver l'emplacement en se désengageant d'un contrat de 100 millions de dollars qui devait en assurer l'exploitation.

Maintenant, selon une solution intéressante en ce qui concerne la conservation, on a proposé de vendre les droits au développement de l'espace au-dessus de cet emplacement historique afin de créer un développement avec deux éléments principaux, un centre commémoratif et une tour commerciale.

Un plan général comprenant les problèmes spécifiques et complexes de l'emplacement sera déterminé au moyen d'un concours architectural prestigieux. On vise à élaborer une résolution de nombreux problèmes multidisciplinaires tels que:

- la conservation des matériaux in situ.

les demandes du public et les engagements politiques voulant lui rendre ces fondations accessibles.

les difficultés d'une bonne interprétation du site y compris un plan qui soit sensible aux bâtiments historiques voisins.

Ce site est devenu un totem culturel. Partout dans le monde, des sites archéologiques ont été préservés et incorporés dans l'environnement urbain contemporain, par exemple la maison de Benjamin Franklin en Philadelphia, Jorvik en York, Angleterre, La Crypte Archéologique, Paris, et le Musée Romain a Merida en Espagne.

Il devient maintenant très stimulant de comparer ces efforts avec une telle première expérience en Australie.