FIRST GOVERNMENT HOUSE SITE
Sydney, Australia

STATEMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

First Government House Site, Bridge Street, Sydney  October, 1983
(Photo:  Anne Bickford)

A report by
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for
THE AUSTRALIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Need to Establish Significance

'Cultural Significance' is a concept which helps in establishing the significance of a place beyond its obvious utilitarian value.

The assessment of significance and the preparation of a statement of cultural significance are essential pre-requisites to making decisions about the future of a place and its conservation.

In the case of the First Government House site certain decisions have been made or are about to be made concerning the future of the place, in the absence of any comprehensive assessment or statement of significance being available for public discussion.

In the Australia ICOMOS Charter for the Conservation of Cultural Significance (The Burra Charter) Cultural Significance means "aesthetic, historic, scientific of social value for past, present or future generations".

1.2 Method

This report has been prepared following the method described in the Australia ICOMOS Guidelines to the Burra Charter: Cultural Significance (Draft, 31/10/1983).

1.3 Authorship

This report has been prepared for the Australian Archaeological Association (AAA) in its capacity as a professional group concerned with the history of Australia.

The report was prepared by a committee, convened by Peter White, on behalf of the AAA. The committee comprised Anne Bickford, Robert Irving, Michael Pearson, Helen Proudfoot, Meredith Walker and Peter White. The Australian Heritage Commission assisted with expenses and the report was typed by Robyn Wood.

1.4 Use of the Report

The report is available for use without restriction, but with appropriate acknowledgement. It is intended as an aid to public discussion and appreciation of the significance of First Government House Site and its appropriate conservation. It may be copied if desired.

1.5 Extent of the Site

The extent of the site discussed in this report is shown on Map A, page 20. The boundary is drawn to appropriate cadastral boundaries that encompass the matters in i), ii) and iii), below:

i) the location of in situ remains of First Government House as known by excavation; (Map D, page 22)

ii) the extent of the house as indicated by Mortimer Lewis' drawing of 1845, in relation to current topographical features (Map C, page 21)

iii) the land owned by the NSW State Government, and the subject of recent development proposals, and currently the subject of a proposed architectural competition.

This area, with its contents, will be referred to as the First Government House Site (FGH). Any such reference includes Government House itself together with all outbuildings and areas between them.
1.6 Constraints and Limitations of the Report

The AAA saw a need to prepare, for public use, a report considering all aspects of significance of the site - not only the obvious significance of the in situ remains - and the Committee members were chosen accordingly.

The report is based upon existing research and information available to the committee, and upon the expertise of the Committee members.

The object of the AAA was to have the report prepared as soon as possible, so that the matters it contains could be considered in the current public debate about the site and its future. Time, therefore, was a constraint, and no research was undertaken specifically for this report.

However, the Committee believes that with more time and resources, the assessment presented in this report, and the information on which it is based, could be documented in greater detail and with a fuller discussion of the reasoning involved.

In accordance with Australia ICOMOS Draft Guidelines for Cultural Significance this report does not consider the other factors which affect the conservation of the site, such as the appropriate techniques for preserving and protecting the in situ remains, and the interpretation and display of the site, which would need to be considered prior to preparing any proposals for development and use of the site.

1.7 Sources

The principal source of information about the history of the site is:
2. HISTORY, EVIDENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

The First Government House Site is discussed in relation to three time periods: before 1788; 1788-1845; 1845-1983. The history of the site is not discussed in detail here, but references are given in 1.7.

2.1 Before 1788

No physical evidence of usage of the site by Aboriginal people has been found.

There is evidence of the environment of Sydney Cove before major changes to it. This comprises natural soil profiles and drainage patterns, which are rare, but not unique. They have historical and scientific significance in that they form an essential part of our knowledge of how the site has been altered through time.

Further, this evidence can be linked with maps, illustrations, diaries and other documents, which make this site one of the best documented areas of settlement. This amplifies the physical evidence.

2.2 1788-1845

This is the period within which First Government House and associated buildings were erected, extended and demolished, and the buildings and site used as the centre of government.

The evidence from this period comprises that directly recovered from the site, primarily archaeological, and about the site, primarily written and pictorial.

The archaeological information comprises:
emancipists at First Government House significantly affected the colony's social and political structure. The markers erected by the RAHS in 1917 and The Sydney City Council in the 1960s are later expressions of social significance.

- it is, and always will be, of great educational value as a vehicle for learning and teaching and a trigger to the imagination.

(b) historic:
- association with historic persons, such as governors, foreign visitors, explorers, Aboriginals, merchants, settlers and statesmen.

- association with historic events, such as the first European settlement, the beginnings of the press, the Rum Rebellion and the meeting of the first Legislative Council.

- association with a major phase in Australia's governmental and administrative history. First Government House was the umbilical cord with the U.K. through which government flowed until the governor moved to the current government house (circa 1842). First Government House was the centre of governmental power throughout its life.

- as an exemplar of architectural history. The in situ works and structures and the associated documentary evidence demonstrate that the first building was of a high standard, beyond that of other, domestic, architecture of the period. The changes in the building over time show the influence of overseas architectural trends, and the need for more space for administrative and residential purposes. The site's evolution further demonstrates architectural adaptations to the Australian environment, notably in the use of verandahs and covered ways. In its final form the building became a synthesis of diverse elements, echoing the European Picturesque style.
(d) aesthetic

The aesthetic integrity of the First Government House site will ultimately depend on:

- the retention of an appropriate visual setting without environmental intrusions which adversely affect appreciation or enjoyment of the place, and

- direct visibility of the remains, since only if they are visible can their form, scale, material, texture and three-dimensional qualities be appreciated.

There are three aspects to the aesthetic significance of First Government House:

- within the site the remains themselves, both in situ and removed, have unique qualities of form, scale and texture.

- within the townscape of Bridge and Phillip Streets, the site contributes both variation in terms of space and scale, and continuity in the use and scale of materials.

- within the city of Sydney the site provides a balance to the dominant, verticality of the city buildings, and evokes the previous form of the city.

2.3 1845-1983

In this period the site was used for a number of purposes. Following the demolition of First Government House, Bridge and Phillip Streets were constructed, and part or all of the land within their boundaries was used as an engineer's store, a carter's yard, for shops, government offices, dwellings and a car park. Although less direct research has been undertaken on the use of the site during this period, much physical evidence, and supportive documentary data, are already known. First Government House site at this period is best discussed in terms of several areas.
first meeting in No. 47, and in 1908 the map-maker H.E.C. Robinson started his business in No. 41.

(b) aesthetic value. The scale of the buildings as well as their form and material evoke the streetscape and townscape of the period.

2.3.3 36-42 Young Street

This was built as a unit about 1875 and occupied as government offices, to which a Mines Department museum was later added. The building is still substantially complete. There is also in-ground evidence of the use of this building in the form of building materials, stone, glass, ceramic, metal and other artefacts. In situ works, such as drains, may exist.

This building has significance:

(a) historic. The building is very probably a unique example of an office block being deliberately built in a residential terrace style. It housed several government departments or branches in their formative years. William Kemp, the first architect for the Department of Public Instruction, established that Department's design branch in this building.

(a) aesthetic. The building is of aesthetic value both in terms of its overall design and in terms of the similarities and variations in its detailing in fireplaces, wooden and plaster fittings. It is also of aesthetic value in terms of its contribution to Young Street and Bridge Street streetscapes, through its features of domestic scale, quality of detail and building form within streets otherwise dominated by public and commercial buildings.
2.3.6 44-50 Young Street

These buildings were constructed after World War II. They are of historic significance in the context of this report because they are built over part of the 1788-1845 buildings.
4. STATEMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The most important fact about the First Government House site is that it contains the remains of the administrative and social centre of the first permanent European occupation in Australia. The site contains the only remains from 1788 known to survive in 1983. The remains have been in the past, are now and will be in the future seen as a cultural and historical landmark and focus of sentiment for the Australian community and for individual groups within it. This value of the site depends to a large extent on the visible presence and form of the remains from the period 1788-1845.

First Government House site has a series of historic associations which combine to give the place a unique historic significance. These historic associations include:

- the use of the site by a large number of prominent historic figures, both European and Aboriginal, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,
- the role of the site and its inhabitants in events of major historical importance,
- the association with a number of major formative phases in Australian history and the administration of the colony of New South Wales,
- evidence of the formative phase of Australian architectural history and building technology, of which the site and its remains are an exemplar.

The potential of the site to answer research questions in these and other fields gives the place great scientific significance.

The buildings at 39-47 Phillip Street and 36-42 Young Street, which flank and partly cover the 1788-1845 remains, are important in their own right. They have historical value. The former are rare survivors of residential use in this part of the city, and included among their residents several historically important figures; the latter is a probably unique example of office accommodation in the terrace style. These buildings also have townscape value.
5. FUTURE OF THE SITE

The future of the site is an issue of national importance and beyond the concern of any one organisation or group. Its investigation and conservation should be undertaken to the highest possible standards, and in accordance with ICOMOS principles.

The implications of this report, and statement of significance, are that:

1. On the site of the First Government House remains there must be no development other than that necessary for the conservation and interpretation of those remains. This restriction must apply to the entire area of the former car park.

2. Any development proposal concerning other areas of the site must give major consideration to their cultural significance.

3. Until such time as a conservation plan is prepared and implemented, the site must be given every possible legal and physical protection. This should include the placing of a conservation order over the entire site.

The other major aspect of the future of the site is the need to prepare a conservation plan. Such a plan must be based on understanding the cultural significance of the site and its physical condition. It must take into consideration all aspects of its cultural significance without unwarranted emphasis on any one. The conservation proposals should make use of all the disciplines which can contribute to the study and safeguarding of the site.

The conservation plan should involve the least possible intervention with the existing remains, and must maintain an appropriate visual setting. Environmental intrusions which adversely affect appreciation of enjoyment of the place should be excluded.
Graphics

Cover. First Government House Site from Chief Secretary's Building, October 1963
(Anne Bickford)

Map A. Extent of the site (R. Irving) 20

Map B. The site in relation to Sydney
(R. Irving) 20

Map C. Plan of First Government House in 1845,
by Mortimer Lewis, in relation to the site (Richard Stafford for Anne Bickford) 21

Map D. Location of in situ remains
(Richard Stafford for Anne Bickford) 22
ARCHAEOLOGICAL GRID REFERENCE
FIRST GOVERNMENT HOUSE PROJECT
TOTAL AREA EXCAVATED BY THE 2/10/1983