

News Update

July 1993

## GSDA No.1 Dwelling Open Day Sunday 1st August

The Historic Houses Trust of NSW (HHT) have organised another Open Day for the Griffin house at 136 Edinburgh Road Castlecrag for next Sunday between 10am and 4pm. Architect Bruce Rickard's sketch plans of two options for the house will be on view in the house. One option is for an extension using the existing garage (which was originally freestanding but was enlarged in the 1940s to butt up to the house) and a second option is for a separate dwelling that would incorporate the original Griffin wall of the garage and see the rest of the garage demolished. This has the advantage of allowing the house to remain unaltered in its room function and for the house to be viewed in the round as it was originally designed, but has the disadvantage of requiring additional car spaces.

We encourage all our members to view these sketch plans at the house next Sunday and put your comments in the comment book that will be provided. We commend the Historic Houses Trust for providing this opportunity for public participation.

## Notice of Meeting Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc.

**General Meeting: Monday 9th August 1993 8pm**  
**GSDA No.1 Dwelling, 136 Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag**

Agenda:

Minutes of previous meeting  
Matters arising  
President's Report  
Treasurer's Report  
General Business

Historic Houses Trust of NSW are kindly providing the venue and the guest speakers for this meeting. The guest speakers will be Sheri Burke who is Senior Curatorial Co-ordinator, and James Broadbent who is Senior Curatorial Advisor with HHT. Sheri and James will give a brief background to HHT and talk about GSDA No.1 Dwelling, the parameters of the project and the conservation work that will begin on the house only a few days after this meeting.

We remind all members that the membership subscription for 1993/4 is now due and request that the enclosed form and payment be forwarded to the Society.

**Pymont Incinerator Fund** This \$300,000 fund was contributed by the developers of the Pymont Incinerator site as a condition of development instead of constructing an interpretive facility. The Society persuaded Sydney City Council that establishment of the fund would be better compensation for loss of the Incinerator than the recreation of an end wall as proposed by the developer.

The allocation of the fund was delegated to John McInerney, City Planner, who set up a working committee to formulate proposals. John Kabos, Trevor Waters and Max Bourke represented the Society. The Society encouraged and facilitated a joint proposal from Melbourne University Architecture Faculty and Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. The major part of the fund was allocated to assist in funding an international exhibition and catalogue. The exhibition is planned for 1995/96 and is to take place in Australia and USA using material from the USA, Australia and India.

In addition funds were allocated for the conservation and storage of tiles salvaged from Pymont Incinerator, the preparation of a video and photographic record of the Incinerator before and during demolition and the production of a book about Pymont Incinerator.

In February, the Society was extremely pleased when the City Planner, John McInerney allocated up to \$50,000 at the request of the Society to assist Historic Houses Trust with their purchase of the Griffin house, GSDA No.1 Dwelling at 136 Edinburgh Road, Castlecrag. Without this financial support, this very significant intact Griffin house could not have been acquired.

Since then the organisation of the international exhibition planned for 1995/96 has been moving ahead. Prof. James Weirick from University of NSW, David Dolan, curator from the Powerhouse Museum, Jeffrey Turnbull, lecturer in Architecture at University of Melbourne, and Peter Navaretti who has been seconded to University of Melbourne, flew to USA with the financial assistance of the Australian Consulate in Washington and met with Prof. Paul Kruty, Assistant Professor of Architectural History at University of Illinois, Prof. Paul Sprague, Architecture Historian from University of Wisconsin, and Allan Forester who is chairman of the Architecture Faculty of University of Illinois. This meeting established a co-operative team approach for the difficult task of co-ordinating the vast amount of material spread in many locations across three continents.

## **TEC Griffin Heritage and Bush Regeneration Walk** *Sunday 29th August 1993*

This is an all day walk organised by the Total Environment Centre with a 9.30am start at Harold Reid Reserve. Prof. James Weirick, Head of the School of Architecture at University of NSW and Gay Spies, President of the Willoughby Environment Protection Association (WEPA) will be the expert guides for this most interesting day that will include a walk through beautiful bushland skirting Middle Harbour, and the bush regeneration site in the *Valley of the Water Dragons*, and then on to the built heritage of Griffin's contoured roads and stone and knitlock houses in Castlecrag. The tour is organised by the Total Environment Centre and the cost is \$25. Bookings are essential as numbers are limited. For more information or bookings ring Betty Mason at TEC on 247 4717.

**"Castlecrag Walk" Pamphlet** Congratulations to Willoughby City Library for this excellent pamphlet titled *Castlecrag Walk* which is available free from the library. The attractive pamphlet has a brief summary of Castlecrag's history and a short description of 32 points of interest including the Walter Burley Griffin houses and Haven Amphitheatre, houses designed by Eric Nicholls who was Griffin's junior partner and a couple of the Castlecrag reserves. A map is also included to make the self-guided walk easy to follow. The Local History section of the Library have done a fine job researching and writing the pamphlet which was published just this month.

**Award to Heritage Writer** Congratulations to Geraldine O'Brien, Heritage Writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* who won the President's Award at the Royal Australian Institute of Architects 1993 Architecture Awards. The RAIAs NSW Chapter president, Mr John Richardson said, in giving the award, that Ms O'Brien had "consistently championed the conservation of our built heritage". It was Ms O'Brien's excellent article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* early this year on GSDA No.1 Dwelling that was instrumental in creating a greater awareness and appreciation of the house that encouraged The Historic Houses Trust to acquire and conserve the house.

## Hamburgers versus Heritage

At Mittagong NSW, gateway to the Southern Highlands where the road to Bowral and Moss Vale leaves the Old Hume Highway, there is a distinctive wedge-shaped building of sandstone and render designed by Eric Nicholls, Walter Burley Griffin's junior partner. It was built in 1953 as the former Mittagong Council Chambers, however in 1980 Mittagong Shire Council amalgamated with two other councils to become the Wingecarribee Shire Council with its headquarters in Moss Vale. Since 1980 the building has been used by Berrima District Historical Society together with the Southern Highlands Tourist Office, but now the Wingecarribee Shire Council wants to demolish the Eric Nicholls building and develop the site, possibly as a MacDonaldis!!

The local residents are outraged at this proposed destruction of heritage and alienation of publicly owned land. Their Mittagong Townscape Association has put together a Community Concept Plan that incorporates a variety of community uses including a visitor information centre, theatre, youth space, coffee shop for lease and crafts market. With some fresh paint and a little repair work the building could easily be restored to its former glory, standing as the proud landmark behind the town's steeped clock and war memorial. However, this has been totally ignored by Council which now has its own Development Application (DA) for the site on exhibition until 9th August. The DA has two options both of which involve the demolition of the Eric Nicholls' building known as the Mittagong Memorial Hall.

The Wingecarribee Council's address is Elizabeth Street, Moss Vale NSW 2577 if you would like to write to them and ask them to preserve this important and attractive public building.

## 2nd World Congress on Art Deco: Perth. 1 - 5 October

The Art Deco Society of Western Australia is hosting this world congress which aims to promote, identify and protect the sites and monuments of the international Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s. Guest speakers from USA, Canada, England, New Zealand and Germany will give papers at the congress. It is being held at the University of Western Australia and tours of the districts surrounding Perth will be conducted.

Following the congress a celebration will be held in Melbourne on 6th and 7th October and then the Art Deco Society of NSW will hold its Annual Art Deco October Weekend from 8th to 10th October in Sydney including the Dinner Dance in the splendid Art Deco interior of the Royal Automobile Club of Australia on Saturday 10th October. A lecture will be given by Alistair Duncan who was head of Christie's, New York and now has his own consultancy, on Saturday 9th October at 10am at the Powerhouse Museum, Target Theatre. After this there will be further celebrations in Napier, that wonderful Art Deco town in New Zealand.

Special airfares are available to Perth. For further details please contact the Art Deco Society of NSW in Sydney:

Mary Nilsson (02) 419 4259 or

Diana Hunter (02) 869 2235 or

the Society Art Deco Victoria in Melbourne:

Suzie Lloyd (03) 419 8741 (ah).

## **Gundarimba** at Jamberoo

This stately two-storey country home with six large bedrooms is being auctioned on site at 2pm on Saturday 31st July. *Gundarimba's* owners believe the house was designed by Walter Burley Griffin in 1929 but the Society as yet has not been able to verify that information. The house certainly sounds wonderful with open fireplaces, built-in wardrobes and decorative ceilings. Its address is 45 Allowrie Street, Jamberoo, which is a two-hour drive south of Sydney.

# Burley Griffin leaves his Canberra stamp on Iowa

By TERRY INGRAM

IF Australia can have its Californian bungalows, an Iowa real estate agent is currently touting a "Canberra castle."

Mr Dick Mathes has on his books a house which was the work of an architect whose international reputation was made largely Down Under.

The house, in Mason City, is popularly known as The Castle. It is spectacularly sited over a crag.

The J.G. Melson House at 56 River Heights Drive is by the architect of Sydney's Castlecrag — and of Canberra: Walter Burley Griffin.

The sizable, three-bedroom, stone house on an extensive block of land is on offer for \$US195,000, much less than the \$A430,000 paid in 1988 for the one-bedroom house designed by Burley Griffin at Castlecrag for Frank Duncan in 1934.

But Mason City is not the world's most desirable address.

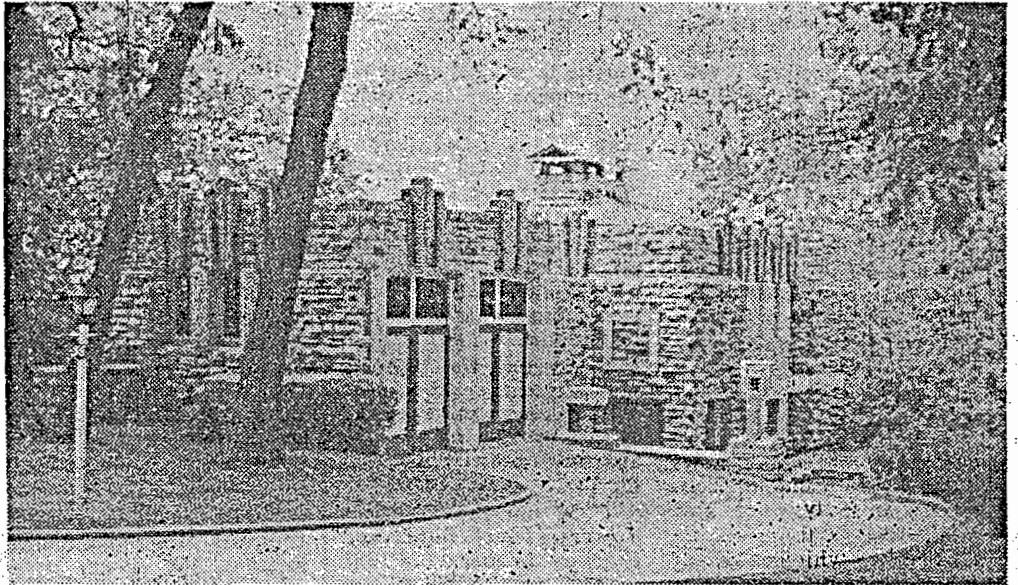
In north-east Iowa, Mason City has snow four months of the year.

The reason for the city's existence is largely gone. The big quarrying industry which gave the city its name is a fraction of its former size, although cement is still manufactured there.

The population of Mason City is only about 32,000.

Mr Mathes is pinning his hopes for the house on the town's new industries, one of which is medicine. An up-market medical facility has been established there and there is also a large shopping centre servicing more than its share of Iowa.

Thanks to this "revival", Mr Mathes claims to have sold



The J.G. Melton House — Mason City's "Castle" designed by Walter Burley Griffin

three houses by other less-celebrated architects in Mason City for about \$US300,000 last year.

However, even if the Frank Duncan house at Castlecrag appears more expensive than anything Griffin did Down Under, the US may still have a sincerer appreciation of its native son.

Griffin was an architect of the plains, a member of the Prairie School and therefore more familiar and better understood in the US.

Walter Burley Griffin's Australian incinerators have been mostly demolished, at least one of his cinemas lost and almost all of his 13 Castlecrag houses have been altered.

The price on the Melson house has been brought down from \$US250,000 over the past year but the house, according to Mr Mathes, has

not been marketed strongly yet and the price set was considered a little ambitious.

An estimated \$US50,000 moreover would have to be spent on the kitchen to bring it up to modern standards. The previous occupant has moved into a nursing home.

As described by Mr Mathes' literature: "In a highly romantic fashion, the stone walls extend the verticality of the house's cliff-edge site and harmoniously unite it with the dramatic landscape.

"The absence of the usual overhanging roof emphasises a volumetrically sculptured quality, imaginative use of poured concrete for window mullions, and decorative accents provide a contrast to the highly textured stone walls.

"Dubbed The Castle by natives, the house achieves a dramatic and individualistic

form appropriate to its setting."

Burley Griffin arrived in Australia in 1913, just as the Melson House was being completed.

He thought he was going to supervise the construction of Canberra but his clashes with officialdom had the ring of the later Sydney Opera House controversy.

His Canberra contract was not renewed when it expired in 1920 and he left for India where he died in 1937.

His work in the US included several other buildings in Mason City which are part of the city's historic walking tour, and in Chicago.

Mr Mathes claims the Melson House, named after its builder, demonstrates the "highly original direction" Griffin was taking as a result of his Canberra commission.