

NEWS UPDATE June 1992

## "Griffin's Tribute to the 20th Century" Demolished

After two decades of appalling neglect and abuse the internationally renowned **Pymont Incinerator** suffered the final humiliation, that of demolition, on Thursday 7th May 1992. Sydney City Council had last year approved demolition and in April the conditions for demolition were set and the City Planner delegated to decide the final conditions. It was stipulated that three complete sets of tiles should be retained, and that the Powerhouse Museum was to be allowed to take another two sets.

A complete set of synthetic stone tiles comprised 47 different tile designs that each belonged to one of the four ornamental patterns, that of spherical, triangular, crescent and square. Trevor Waters reports that interviews with Aaron Bolot, the engineer responsible for the production of the working drawings for the Pymont Incinerator, confirmed that the ornamentation of the building was arranged according to the Anthroposophical principles of the etheric formative forces of warmth, gas, liquid and solid. This relationship between metaphysical symbolism and their geometric representation is alluded to in Marion Mahony Griffin's unpublished autobiography, *Magic of America*.

However, not even one complete set of tiles was retained. The scaffolding put up for the purpose of removing tiles was only up for two days and was taken down before the Powerhouse Museum realized that their two sets of tiles were incomplete. The three sets of tiles that Sydney City Council were meant to have collected were also incomplete and they argued that the tiles crumbled as they were removed but this, we discovered later from our own experience of retrieving tiles, was not so.

So not one complete set of tiles was retained but nevertheless the City Planner gave the go-ahead for the demolition on Wednesday 6th May. The Society was informed of the permission to demolish late that afternoon and this faxed letter also contained an "invitation" from the developer, Meriton Apartments Pty Ltd, for four of our members to retrieve tiles at our own risk during the demolition.

In order to retrieve tiles without endangering the volunteers' safety, the Walter Burley Griffin Society requested the Heritage Council of NSW to put a Stop Demolition Order on the Incinerator for 48 hours to permit the volunteers to safely retrieve tiles. The request was faxed through to the Chairman of the Heritage Council at 8am on Thursday 7th.

The volunteers arrived at the Incinerator to find that the demolition equipment was already at work and that they were locked off the site except for the 10 minute morning tea break and 30 minute lunch break. No Stop Demolition Order came despite numerous phone calls to the Heritage Council and the Sydney City Council. During the short tea and lunch breaks the six volunteers with just a rope and extension ladder, managed to retrieve 57 of the large synthetic stone tiles including three designs that had not been retrieved before.

Our thanks to Society members Trevor Waters, Mark Crew, Craig Walsh and Adrienne Kabos and to architecture students Robyn Simpson and Dianna Pringle for their wonderful work that resulted in an extra 57 tiles being saved. Eight other tiles were in fact retrieved but these were destroyed by the demolishers, and a further 20 tiles removed on the Saturday disappeared before they could be removed from the site.

It was an appalling sight to watch this majestic building being destroyed by three huge machines. Channels 9 and 7 TV News crews along with the film crew from the Powerhouse Museum were there for over three hours to record the sorry sight. By 10.30am the western wall containing some of the best preserved tiles was demolished and by 3pm there was only rubble left. When Meriton's manager was asked why he hadn't 'invited' volunteers on the site to retrieve tiles before demolition began, he had no answer. Had we been given this opportunity we could have saved many more tiles including all the missing tiles from the sets.

The Heritage Council did not issue the Stop Demolition Order and instead on Friday 8th May (the day after the demolition) sent a fax to the developers requesting them to give the Society "reasonable access".

The Pymont Incinerator was of immense architectural significance not only nationally but also internationally. Yet the two bodies with authority over its heritage, the local council and the Heritage Council of NSW, have failed to protect it even to the extent of failing to stop the destruction of the fabric which could have been saved relatively easily. These two bodies permitted or actively participated in the destruction of this internationally significant building that is now lost forever.

## Demonstration to Save our Heritage

The Society joined with architects, Pymont residents, Castlecrag residents, architecture and landscape architecture students, and conservationists to demonstrate on the street below the Incinerator on 5th May about the need to save our heritage. The three metre high puppets of Walter and Marion attended the demonstration and were very eye-catching and photogenic on the Channel 10 News. Thanks go to Cliff Taylor and Mark Crew for providing transport for the puppets. Thanks also to the great crowd that attended and to Anna Rubbo who organised a petition and circulated it to the relevant authorities.

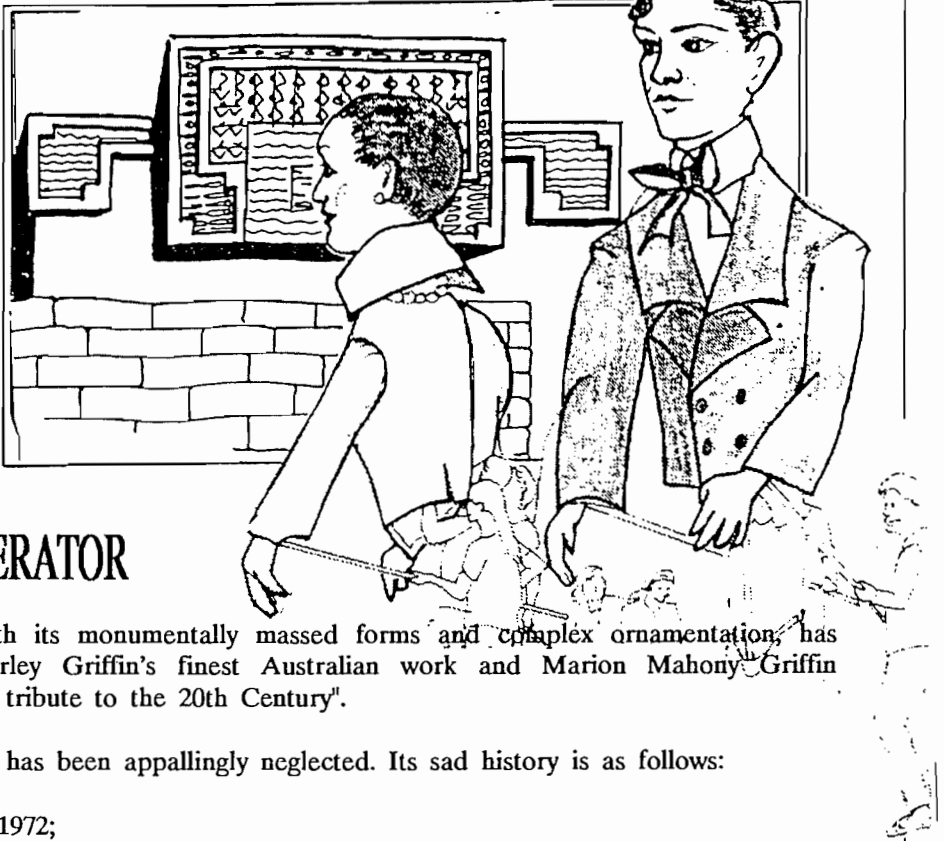
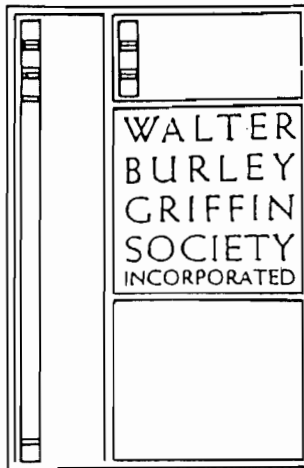
## Enthusiastic Response to Walks

The guided walk during Heritage Week was a great success with over 150 who attended. The walk went past eight of the Griffin Castlecrag houses and concluded at the Fishwick House where the owners and tenants kindly allowed the large crowd in to look at its stunning interior of beautiful details and spatial proportions. The only disappointment for the day was that the Devonshire tea and instrumental music set up in the Haven Amphitheatre by Lisa Purser and her great team had to be relocated because of a shower of rain.

The walk organised by the Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens last year was so popular that they organised another for this year. On Sunday 14th June the Willoughby Environmental Protection Association Inc. (WEPA) and Professor James Weirick for the Walter Burley Griffin Society Inc. again hosted the all-day walk that began at Harold Reid Reserve and included a guided walk through the large bush regeneration project in Sugarloaf Valley and past many of the Griffin houses at Castlecrag, concluding at the foreshore cottages which were the first settlements at Castlecrag, predating Griffin.

## Holdsworth Gallery Exhibition

Sydney landscape artist Jane Bennett is holding an exhibition of her new works of the Pymont and Balmain areas at the Holdsworth Gallery, 86 Holdsworth Street, Woollahra. The exhibition of oils and watercolours includes some six or seven striking paintings of the Pymont Incinerator. Jenny would have liked to have painted more of the majestic incinerator but as she said, "Sydney landscape painters have to be as fast as lightning!" The exhibition is on display from 13th June to 1st July 1992 and gallery hours are 10am to 5pm Monday to Saturday, 12 noon to 5pm on Sunday.



## PYRMONT INCINERATOR

**Pyrmont Incinerator**, with its monumentally massed forms and complex ornamentation, has been called Walter Burley Griffin's finest Australian work and Marion Mahony Griffin described it as "Griffin's tribute to the 20th Century".

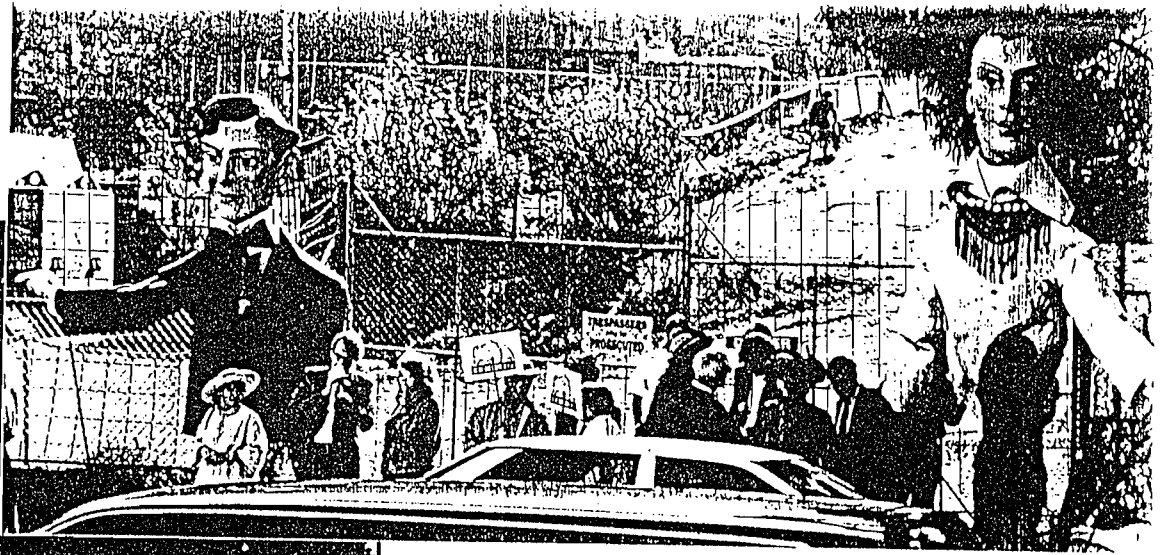
Yet Pyrmont Incinerator has been appallingly neglected. Its sad history is as follows:

- completed in 1935;
- operation ceased in 1972;
- classified by the National Trust in 1976;
- in 1977 Sydney City Council substantially unroofed it and demolished the chimney stack at a cost of \$250,000 (at this time the whole building could have been restored for the same cost); in October 1987 Sydney City Council sold the site for \$1.35 million to Balmain Breweries P/L (later Leon Fink bought the company);
- in 1989 the weighbridge building adjoining the Incinerator (covered by a Permanent Conservation Order) was demolished;
- in 1990 Meriton Apartments P/L bought the site for over \$7 million;
- also in 1990 the Heritage Council recommended reconstruction of all parts of the Incinerator visible from Bank St/Victoria Rd including the 40 metre high chimney stack;
- following that in the same year Sydney City Council approved the building's demolition conditional on a satisfactory development approval;
- in April 1991 Meriton submitted a scheme that included demolishing the Incinerator and building two 16 storey towers with a memorial garden wall of some of the Incinerator's tiles;
- in May 1991 the Australian Heritage Commission listed the Incinerator on the Interim Register of the National Estate;
- in December 1991 Meriton submitted another scheme of a single horseshoe-shaped apartment block with one-sixth of the Incinerator reconstructed at the western end. An alternative proposal was also developed that the developer put the cost of the reconstruction to an interpretive facility which could be established off site; the estimated cost of this reconstruction was \$1.3 million but Meriton said it would cost only \$300,000 and accordingly offered only \$300,000 to Council for the interpretive facility;
- in April 1992 the Council approved demolition and delegated the City Planner to decide the final conditions. The Council also released the developer from the obligation to provide the interpretive facility in exchange for a donation of \$300,000;
- instead of insisting on retention of all the tiles and decorative material such as the gates (as had been the general understanding whenever the matter was before Council) the City Planner required only the removal and retention of five complete sets of tiles (1 set includes 47 tiles of different ornamental design);
- Tuesday 5 May 1992, a demonstration was held below the Incinerator by conservationists, Pyrmont residents, architects, architecture students and the Walter Burley Griffin Society to draw attention to the need to save our heritage and to save the ornamental tiles of the Incinerator;

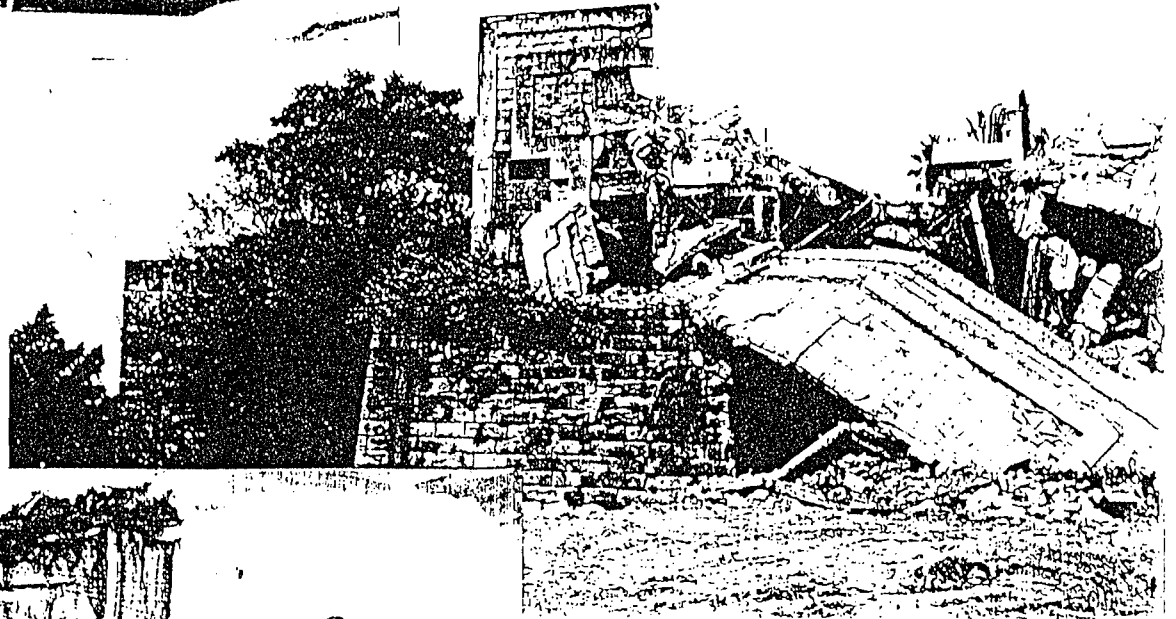
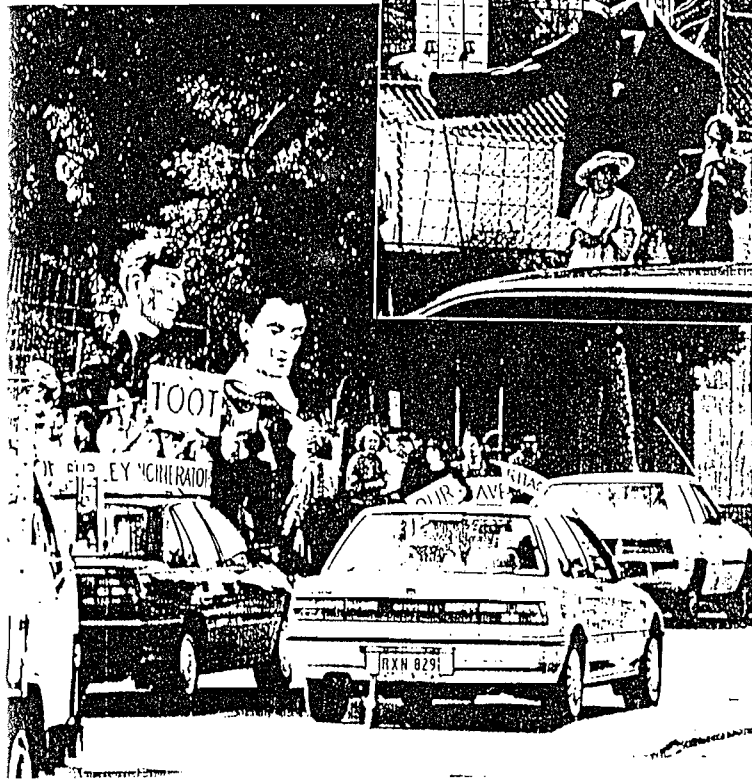
- . Wednesday 6 May the City Planner gave the go ahead for demolition, despite not even one complete set of tiles being retained. The developer "invited" the Walter Burley Griffin Society and the National Trust to remove tiles from the site at their own risk during demolition;
- . Thursday 8am 7 May the Walter Burley Griffin Society faxed an urgent request to the Heritage Council of NSW asking the Chairman to put a Stop Work Order on the site for 48 hours so that the tiles could be removed by volunteers without endangering their lives. That same morning demolition begins. Despite the developer's "invitation" volunteers are locked off the site except for morning tea and 30 minute lunch break. Despite urgent phone calls to the Heritage Council no Stop Work Order was issued and by 10.30am the western wall containing the best preserved tiles was demolished. Volunteers retrieved 57 tiles during the demolisher's morning tea and lunch breaks but by 3pm almost the whole of the Incinerator was demolished;
- . Friday 11am 8 May the Heritage Council of NSW requests the developer "to allow sufficient access to the site during and after demolition .... to salvage items provided that safety concerns are satisfied" but still does not issue a Stop Work Order under Section 36;
- . Saturday 9 May volunteers retrieve another 20 tiles from the rubble but when they return on 14 May to remove them from the site they are denied them by the developer.

The Incinerator was of such special architectural worth that Sydney City Council should have taken exceptional steps to ensure its preservation. New technology would have made it possible to stabilize the concrete to prevent further deterioration so that the Incinerator could have been an historic ruin in the grounds of the development. Alternatively the building could have been reconstructed and the decorative tiles (most of which are still in good condition) reapplied. This last option would have allowed the building to be recycled for any number of other uses such as a hall, swimming pool and gymnasium, restaurant etc.

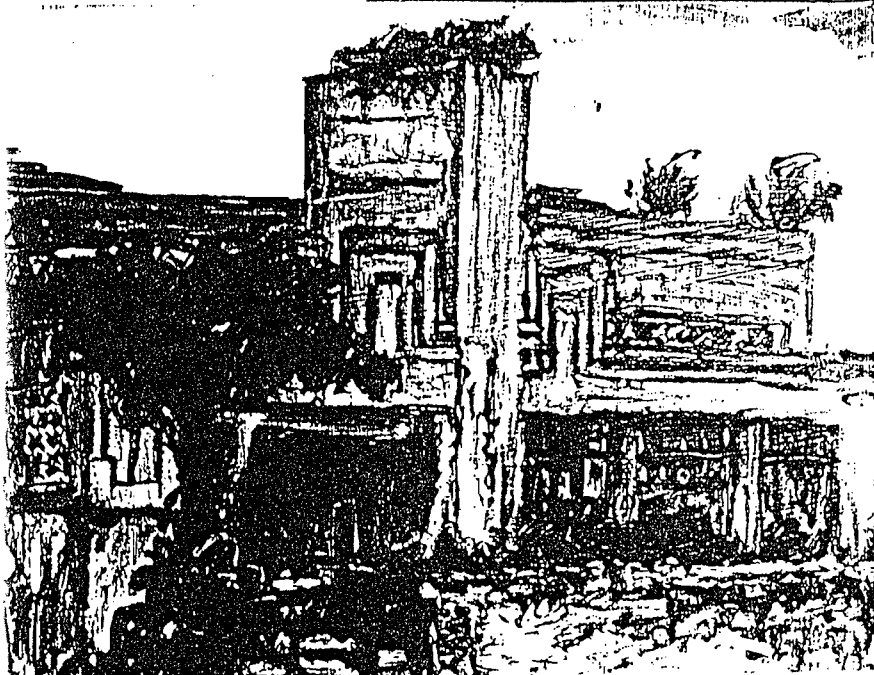
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△ Demonstrators including the giant puppets of Marion & Walter Burley Griffin proclaim the need to Save Our Heritage.



△ The Incinerator's appalling end.



△ The Pymont Incinerator lives on — captured in oil and water colours by artist Jenny Bennett