



THE HOUSE'S CHANGING FORTUNES

Introductory Note: When completed in 1930, the Fishwick house attracted a lot of attention locally. It was the largest house on the Castlecrag Estate, the only one with two storeys, standing far removed from the other Griffin houses on one of the suburb's most spectacular and expensive blocks of land. Strangely, however, the Fishwicks were in residence for only two years before returning home to South Africa. It was left in the care of tenants for the next 15 years until the Fishwicks sold it to the Deans family, who had been renting it for some years. For more on this open the PDF "Thomas Fishwick's Puzzling Investment".

In its heyday the house served the community well as it was a large and delightful gathering place, but even then it was seen as uncompromisingly eccentric, even "*freakish*". It gradually became poorly maintained and leaked badly. Its surrounds, including the contiguous Griffin reserves and pathways, were impenetrably bamboo infested. The house's charms had certainly faded. Recently, however, its declining fortunes changed. Since its careful restoration in the mid 1990s, the qualities and importance of the house have been recognised and it has emerged as one of the most important and emblematic residential buildings which Griffin designed.

Decline of House

Griffin was disillusioned by political and bureaucratic interference in the development of Canberra and by the end of 1920 had cut all ties to his new national capital city. He formed a property development company and applied most of his energy to developing his "ideal suburb" in Sydney, promoting the Castlecrag Estate to an upmarket clientele. A 1924 sales poster for the estate proclaims: "*Best Investment in Residential Property in this Hemisphere*" which would in status "*Surpass Toorak*", Melbourne's most up-market suburb. [1]

Fishwick paid £500 for his block of land, a very large sum at the time, even for prime Sydney residential property. Most other blocks on the Estate with good views of the harbour were on offer for less than £300. The elaborate two-storey house Griffin designed for Fishwick was also very expensive. It cost £3000 to build so that, with the usual fees and taxes, Fishwick paid well over £3500 for his stone mansion. For this outlay, Griffin delivered a highly unusual, very modern house. Importantly, being the most spacious he had built since leaving America, it provided him with his best opportunity to demonstrate his creativity and ingenuity in design and the use of new materials and technologies. However, some of these ultra-modern ideas unfortunately proved to be inappropriate for Australian conditions. They were poorly executed or too radical and ultimately proved detrimental to the house's value.

With the onset of the Great Depression and the failure of Castlecrag to attract its targeted well-off buyers, the value of the house plummeted. In 1931, just before Fishwick permanently left Australia and rented the house, Willoughby Council valued it at £1500 - Fishwick had lost almost sixty percent of his investment in just two years. [2] By 1938, its valuation had dropped to £1350 with a high likelihood of a further decline from the onset of World War II. Evaluating it for possible sale soon after the war, a professional real estate valuer said in his formal report:

"It is very evident that a very large amount of money was expended on the construction of this building, but I am of the opinion that its location, size, design and construction are not favourable [they are] so unorthodox as to be almost freakish." [3]

Re-emergence of House

When bought by the present owners in the mid-1970s the heritage value of the house was scarcely recognised. This reflected the almost complete indifference to 20th century architecture amongst heritage bodies at the time, as well as the wide-spread ignorance about the Griffins and their works.

However, even before its mid-1990s restoration and despite its run-down condition, the house had already begun to attract some attention from an emerging group of people, mostly architectural historians, who recognised its significance. [4] For example, the Walter Burley Griffin Society, which was formed in Sydney in the late 1980s, published the first book in 1994 specifically about the Castlecrag Estate. This displayed a photograph of the house on its cover and described it as “*the most celebrated of Griffin’s Castlecrag houses*”. [5]

The major restoration of the house was completed by 1998. Coincidentally, this was the same year that Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum, the country’s principal technology and design institution, launched “*Beyond Architecture*”, a very successful public exhibition on the Griffins with an excellent accompanying book. A short documentary, mostly filmed in the Fishwick house, was also produced and played on a loop at the exhibition. For details and to see a clip from the documentary, see the site’s “Images of House” section.

There were many other activities at the time of the Powerhouse exhibition. The city’s authoritative newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in promoting its “Design Week” feature, publicised many related events. It printed a special supplement which had a double-page centre spread devoted solely to the house. This featured many beautiful full-colour photographs taken by the *Herald* photographer Patrick Cummins which can be seen in the site’s “Images of House” section.

An open day, also promoted by the *Herald* generated large crowds with many people having to be turned away. Also, a “Virtual Tour” of the house’s rooms was produced by the local holders of this new visual technology who planned to use it as their main promotional tool. [6] These and other related events significantly raised awareness of the house and its qualities, creating a turning point in its fortunes.

Interest in the house has continued to develop, especially amongst non-specialised audiences. This development is further explored in the site’s “Prominence & Significance” section. Briefly, there are three prime factors underpinning this:

- The house’s unrivalled capacity to demonstrate Griffin’s creativity and design skills. Nobody can move through it without being overwhelmed by the novelty and ingenuity of its rooms.
- The ever-broadening acceptance that Griffin was the person who brought to the country an entirely new approach to architecture and gave it a modern Australian voice. The house has clearly emerged as being emblematic of this.
- The role the house has played in introducing the general public to Griffin’s ideas and principles and expressing them persuasively. While being, of course, abstract in nature they, rather than his buildings, are perhaps his greatest legacy. The house has been increasingly chosen to express Griffin’s thoughts in a tangible way. For more on this open the PDF “House as Vehicle to Griffin’s Ideas”.

Prominence Since Restoration

Whatever the driving forces may have been, following its mid 1990s restoration the increase in the prominence of the house has been remarkable. This is particularly so in the number of productions and events addressed to general audiences. The house has been featured in 14 widely distributed books and periodicals, chosen as the setting for three documentaries, illustrated prominently in two major museum exhibitions and has appeared in many journal, magazine and newspaper articles. Internationally, it was selected to illustrate Griffin's work in an authoritative book on the world's best 20th century architecture and has been featured or cited in a number of books on the Griffins' place in the history of architecture which were published in America and Germany.

Footnotes

1. Extracted from GSDA promotional flyer headed "*Before deciding be sure to see the finest harbour views offering in Sydney*" 1924.
2. Information on the Improved Capital Valuations of the house was extracted from Willoughby City Council records and rate notices for Lot 331. DP14804. 15 The Citadel, Castlecrag.
3. Extract from NSW Co-operative Building Society Ltd. Letter to S. Rawson Deans. 29th May, 1945. Courtesy Deans family.
4. No attempt had been made to review the Griffins' lives and works until the publication of books by architectural historians James Birrell (1964) and Donald Leslie Johnson (1977). In the early 1980s Australia's Consul-General in Chicago and the heads of architecture at the Universities of Illinois and Melbourne conceived the idea of setting up the Griffin Exchange Programme to promote research on the Griffins. In the early 1990s the Programme initiated the exhibition *Building for Nature* which toured Australia in 1992. International symposia followed in Urbana in 1997 and 1998. Comprehensive catalogues of their complete works in America, Australia and India were also published (*Walter Burley Griffin in America* Maldre & Kruty 1995 and *The Griffins in Australia and India* Turnbull & Navaretti 1998).
5. *Building for Nature* Walker et al 1994. p62
6. IPIX, the company pioneering "Virtual Tour" technology, used the house to make a demonstration programme for marketing purposes. The specialised photography and software development were successfully completed and a "thank-you" copy presented to the house owners. Unfortunately, due to rapid advances in technology, the IPIX technique soon became obsolete. Their software also became inoperative.