



ON RESTORING A “WORK OF ART”

“This is what we get for leaving a work of art out in the rain.”

Introductory Note: This famous comment has been attributed to the wife of Frank Lloyd Wright’s cousin when commenting on her new, but leaking and damp Wright-designed house. Some have made similar comments about the Fishwick house. Whatever people’s personal opinions about the artistic value of important heritage houses, they certainly raise complex maintenance and restoration issues.

On one extreme, heritage purists might argue that, to the highest degree possible, work on such a house must use materials, construction methods and finishes as closely matching the originals as possible with little regard to cost – to them the owner’s role is clear:

“Griffin houses may be compared with works of art as collectors’ items, which are a responsibility as well as a possession. The role of owners can be likened to that of custodians, who recognise that the place has a value beyond their immediate needs, and a future beyond their ownership.” [1]

In contrast, take the comment of a tradesman who had just been told that his work in the Fishwick house should be of the highest quality; cost should be a secondary consideration; the work should last at least 20 years when a five year horizon is the norm; and that he should take his time and work with care. He responded: *“Geez mate, they should be paying you to live here”.*

Whatever their personal opinions on this, most would agree that ideally a house must function acceptably well, be comfortable to live in and, within reasonable limits, allow a modern life style. In the process of stabilising, repairing and restoring the Fishwick house over some 40 years, the owners confronted many problems, faced serious dilemmas and had to make many complex and significant trade-offs. Some of their thoughts and experiences, detailed below, on making “correct” restoration decisions about a house with heritage significance might be appreciated by other owners.

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Conflicting Considerations

In deciding on the “correct” approach to planning maintenance or restoration work on an important heritage house, four issues are typically involved which are almost always in conflict: authenticity, utility, cost and aesthetics.

Authenticity. Restored features in heritage protected houses ideally should be of the same materials and appearance as the originals, but not identical to them. [2] If this is not possible they should be highly sympathetic to, or at best, relate strongly to the appearance, style and conceptual intent of the originals.

Utility. To many modern home owners, perhaps most, the notion of deliberately installing an item or prolonging the use of a service which performed poorly or ignored modern technological advances would be absurd. Yet this is often a necessary choice, even in a house considered ultra-modern when built.

Cost. Heritage house owners must fact up to the reality that repair, maintenance and operating costs of the building will be higher than normal; however, it is folly to concentrate on cutting costs. The financial pain might be lessened if the house is considered to be an indulgence, similar to owning a yacht or a snarling sports car. A wise practice is to engage only trusted tradesmen who will charge an hourly rate plus the cost of materials. The Fishwick house owners have learned that work done on a fixed-price basis has almost always resulted in conflict. In a complex house built many decades ago it is a truism that *“you never know what you will discover when you start the work”*. When the unexpected happens and material or labour costs increase, it is certain that either the owner or tradesman will be left unhappy or the completed job will prove to be of inferior quality.

Aesthetics. In the Fishwick house, Griffin included many design elements simply to create an interesting atmosphere or to delight the viewer. Often such features cannot be restored because their materials or surface finishes are unavailable. In these situations, before deciding on the nature of restoration work, it is helpful to consider the objective of the original design. For example, a solution might be found by asking “What was Griffin up to here and what would he have done with the materials and techniques which are now available?”

Practical Examples

It is inevitable that difficult decisions will need to be made to resolve conflicts between the four issues to be considered. In practice generally one or two of them will emerge to be relatively much more important than the others. The following seven examples might be helpful:

Entrance hall pillars. When it was discovered that under many coats of paint the “forest” of pillars in the entrance hall had originally been finished in complex, multi-layered and delightful colours, it was clear that it would be worthwhile to spend a lot of time carefully uncovering and restoring them. However, the job was clearly one to be handled only by a skilled tradesman at high cost. Despite this, it was decided that the project should go ahead. In practice the job was much more complicated than it appeared because, in order to select those pillars on which the original finish was in good condition, all eight of them had to be laboriously stripped back. In this example, both the need to make the restored pillars appear similar to those with the original finish and the powerful aesthetic benefit to the room’s atmosphere outweighed the higher cost both in time and money. Utilitarian factors were irrelevant.

Lounge fireplace. This is the most photographed and admired single feature in the house because its design and craftsmanship are superb and it is the focus of its largest room. When its finely finished sandstone blocks began to show damage arising from water leaking from within, there was no question that every effort had to be made, not only to solve the problem urgently, but also to restore the fireplace’s surfaces as authentically as possible, whatever the cost. However, the consequences of this decision were not foreseen. The supervising architect commissioned an in-pipe CCTV investigation which disclosed that the leak arose from a failed storm water down-pipe concealed within the fireplace’s stonework. It also showed that the sewerage and drainage pipes leading from the base of the fireplace to the house’s exterior had cracked; this had been the cause of frequent blockages. One of the most difficult and critical decisions of the entire restoration had to be made: unfortunately, in order to identify the precise location of the leaks and repair them, it would be necessary to raise most of the floor boards in the entrance hall as well as some in the lounge.

Once this was done, it was decided to broaden the task significantly and replace all of the underfloor sewerage and drainage pipes. This in turn required stripping and rebuilding the northern section of the kitchen and the small cupboard off the entrance hall. Thus, a single urgent problem sparked a programme of works which could under normal circumstances have been more carefully and cost- effectively planned. Here, the authenticity of the work was paramount, regardless of cost.

Casement Windows. Choosing to replace rotted windows by precisely duplicating Griffin’s design and highly unusual method of assembly demonstrates that sometimes choosing a very expensive restoration technique is unavoidable. To produce window frames which were as thin as possible, Griffin had rejected the usual practice of securing the glass panes with beading; instead he designed all the windows in the house so that their panes fitted into thin grooves in their frames.

As a result, if a pane of glass was broken, the entire window had to be removed and the four sections of its frame taken apart. Because of their many years of weathering, the frames' joints generally collapsed during this process. Further, the house's paired casement windows were side-hung so replacing a single broken window necessitated two entirely new cedar frames to be custom made and inserted. A loose cricket ball can easily generate a very large bill. Above all, any repaired windows had both to function well be almost indistinguishable from the remainder.

Dining room skylight covers. Early photographs show that when the fish pools in the dining room ceiling were removed in the early 1930s, the voids in the roof were covered by pyramidal glass structures. These were replaced by simple timber frames with wired glass and later by fibreglass domes. The form and materials of all the successive replacement skylights bore no relationship to others in the house. However, the large skylight set above the upper hall was known from the house plans to be original being made of wire-reinforced glass set into a sloping metal frame. This provided an appropriate concept which could be imitated. A specialist in metal design and fabrication was commissioned to produce not only framed glass covers for the skylights but also a kitchen screen door and a metal gate for the courtyard, all in "Griffinesque" designs. Their faithfulness to the original aesthetic was the most significant consideration.

Fish pools. Many people have urged the owners to replicate the overhead fish pools which were inserted in the dining room ceiling. Griffin's design intention here was clear: he and Fishwick are reported to have been delighted by the sunlight shining through the water onto the walls of the room. [3] Their replacement was worth considering. No doubt the room's atmosphere would have been improved enormously and the reinstatement cost would have been acceptable. However, utility became the deciding factor. Constant and difficult maintenance would have been required to remove algae, fish droppings, dead leaves and silt. No doubt these factors had also accounted for the removal of the pools very soon after their completion.

Upper window glazing bars. Griffin's original plans show that all of the upper floor windows had Y-shaped glazing bars. Early photographs show them in place but all had subsequently been removed. It was decided that because they were a very prominent and distinguishing design element they should be replaced. Since the dimensions of the windows varied widely, 168 bars had to be individually cut on a specially made jig then assembled, painted and fixed in place. Reinstalling them was an expensive choice but was one which gave the building's exterior a great deal of its character. They served no utilitarian purpose, but they greatly increased the authenticity of the building's appearance and its impact on the viewer.

Utility room skylight. To provide natural light in the sunken garage/laundry/workshop Griffin designed a small, square skylight set into the maid's terrace. Its glass bricks were in a 5 x 5 waffle pattern between a concrete and steel supporting frame. Many had fractured when the frame's metal corroded so that the skylight began to leak. After extensive searching, it became clear that replacement glass bricks were unavailable, even from overseas.

A simple low-cost solution would have been to install a slab of plain glass. This was rejected because the original waffle pattern was very distinctive and appealing. In a nod to Griffin's aesthetic design intentions, a panel made of safety glass was commissioned and installed. This was etched in the exact pattern of the original glass bricks and their frame. Here, the authenticity of the solution had to be subordinated to its functionality but the Griffin aesthetic was preserved.

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Perspicacious readers would have already recognised from these seven examples that priorities are frequently weighted very differently. Clearly, most decisions were truly *ad hoc*. However, it is also apparent that, in deciding how to proceed with critical work on a heritage house, it is fortunate that well-balanced decisions most often suggest themselves.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted from the Walter Burley Griffin Society of Australia's website.
2. This is the central principle under the Burra Charter which guides *Australia's heritage standards adhering to the guidelines of the International Council on Monuments and Sites - ICOMOS*.
3. Letter from Thomas Fishwick to James Weirick 1972. Courtesy of James Weirick.