

SOCIAL HISTORY OF THE HOUSE

By the late 1920s, Walter Burley Griffin's grandly conceived Castlecrag development had virtually stalled. Almost all of the houses on the Castlecrag Estate were linked to the GSDA, Griffin's development company. Even ten years after the first two demonstration houses were built on Edinburgh Road in 1921, of the 19 houses on the Estate only three had been built by people unconnected with Griffin. Apart from the Felstead (1924) and the Fishwick (1929) houses which were large, the others were quite small and built for people on small budgets. Griffin left for India in 1936 with his dream of his ideal suburb mostly unrealised.

1929-1931

Griffin must have been delighted when Thomas Fishwick, a client with a very large budget, engaged him to build a house. Fishwick proved to be the ideal client, being progressive, well-travelled and interested in technology. This was to be Griffin's second-last commission in Castlecrag and by far the grandest. [1]

The land acquired by Fishwick had been bought two years previously by Elizabeth Bell for 405 pounds and was the pick of the blocks, nestling just below Tower Reserve, the highest point on the Estate. The site, with its wonderful rock formations, had sweeping views across Middle Harbour to the Pacific Ocean.

Thomas Fishwick was the Australian representative of Fowlers, a Leeds-based road-making equipment manufacturing firm. The house cost him 3000 pounds, a large amount for that time. Nancy Deans, a later owner, recalled that the prestige houses on the North Shore Line were selling for less than 1000 pounds before the Depression struck at the end of the 1920s.

No expense was spared on indulgences such as the grand "see-through" fireplace, fish pools in the dining room ceiling, rooftop garden areas, toilets with cisterns concealed on the roof and built-in cupboards seemingly in every nook and cranny. Fishwick's interest in modern technology was reflected in Griffin's provision of separate booths or alcoves for a radio, a telephone and a vacuum cleaner. These were included on the plans; however none was actually built.

Things went wrong for Fishwick when he was held responsible by his company for an "exceptional two-year loss – the debacle of the year"; consequently, in late 1932 he was transferred via the UK back to South Africa. He had spent barely two years in the house and his wife had returned some 20 months earlier, both stating that they disliked Australia. Thus, Fishwick had spent barely two years in the house although he remained the absentee owner until 1945.

1931-1940

In 1924 Griffin had been commissioned by a Russian immigrant, Nisson Leonard-Kanevsky, to design and build a multi-storey Melbourne office block. The two maintained their relationship and later, when the Great Depression hit, together developed 12 incinerators, mostly for Melbourne and Sydney councils. Kanevsky rented the house from Fishwick until 1940 when he departed unexpectedly, allegedly owing Fishwick a year's rent.

1940-1945

There was a serious shortage of rental property during the Second World War. When Edgar Deans, who had been employed as the company secretary of the GSDA since 1928, heard that the Fishwick house was vacant, he contacted his younger brother Rawson who quickly grabbed it. The rent was 20 pounds per month which provided a reasonable return on Fishwick's investment. Rawson had been a sales manager with paper merchants King and Prior before the war, during which he was a conscientious objector and assigned to non-military projects. He and his wife Nancy, a schoolteacher, moved into the house along with his sister, Joyce Batterham. Joyce was then pregnant; her first child was born soon afterwards.

The two families shared the house and it became an important part of Castlecrag's social fabric. Being the largest, it was used for gatherings of the Community Circle, an informal group formed by Marion Griffin many years previously. Meetings were also held of the Castlecrag's Co-operative, which was registered to enable the suburb's residents to apply for funds to help build the kindergarten and community centre – amongst the first in Australia founded in this way.

Joyce Batterham, even in her old age, still had clear memories of early Castlecrag. While at school in Melbourne in the early 1930s, she used to holiday with her brother Edgar who then lived in the GSDA Number 2 house on Edinburgh Road. She met Walter and Marion Griffin and admitted to being "scared" of Marion. Once Walter hailed her, needing some help in planting eucalypt saplings on Edinburgh Road. She remembered him as a gentle, mild-mannered man. To fill in time on school holidays, she also helped Edgar in the Estate office and recalled Walter's habit of scratching notes on scraps of paper and the backs of envelopes, from which she had to type. She visited the Fishwick house frequently because Kanevsky's daughter was her age and they had become friends.

The house attracted the nickname "The Kremlin", not because of Kanevsky's nationality, but because of the alleged pro-communist leanings of some of its residents. After the war, King and Prior refused to re-employ Rawson because of his anti-war stance and so he set up his own stationery and printing supplies

business; at one stage he carried out some small-scale commercial printing in the house's garage.

By 1945 there were seven people living in the house: Joyce had one child and Nancy Deans had two. With both families intending to have more children, the Batterhams left to rent one of Castlecrag's foreshore cottages while they built their own home nearby.

1945-1976

The Deans bought the house from Fishwick in 1945 for 1,750 pounds. Nancy recalled the difficulty of getting banks to advance a mortgage because of its perceived eccentricity; for example, the Valuer-General's assessment was that it "reduced the value of the buildings near it".

The Deans raised three children there and Nancy remained in the house until Rawson's death in 1976, when she decided that maintaining it was becoming too difficult. The house leaked in many places, there was extensive cracking in the exterior stonework and internal rendering, much of the interior and exterior woodwork was rotting, bamboo had made the lower garden areas virtually impenetrable and the kitchen was in a sorry state. Nancy decided to sell.

1976-present

One of the current owners had grown up in Northbridge, the neighbouring suburb, and had lived in a Castlecrag foreshore cottage during the early 1960s, so he knew of the Griffin houses. He and his wife had also lived in Chicago for almost four years, its rich architectural history arousing their curiosity about modern architecture and architects, in particular Frank Lloyd Wright.

When, by chance, they saw that the Fishwick house was for sale and open for inspection, they decided to have a look, strictly for a "stickybeak". To their surprise, Nancy Deans had been the high school French teacher of one of them. The couple's interest in the house was enhanced by the knowledge of Griffin's ties to Chicago and to Wright. They bought it for \$98,000, thus becoming only the third owners of the house during its over 85-year history.

They raised their two children in the house; their daughter's memories of growing up were of "a leaky, window-banging, continually being renovated place.....Now as a visitor to the house there is a sense of 'home', but I'm also very much more aware of its place in the Crag". Their son claimed that "growing up as a child in one of his houses always meant feeling both exhilaratingly and frighteningly close to nature".

From 1989 the house was rented while the family was overseas. On their return in 1996 they immediately commenced its major restoration programme. With the

completion of this work in mid-1998, the Fishwick house stands alongside the GSDA Number 1 house and the Cheong house as the most authentically restored of Griffin's buildings on the Estate. As a machine for living it has been improved significantly and a great amount of effort went into preserving, and in some cases revealing for the first time in living memory, the architectural and design philosophies of Walter Burley Griffin.

The final words about the house are best left to their son. "After having lived overseas for many years, the joy of coming home is almost as much about being back in the house as it is seeing my parents. To me they are inseparable. Which is why it's still my favourite place in the world".

Footnotes:

1. *Building for Nature* 1994. p 62