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Wolli Creek Update

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The house in the vale

■ By GAVIN GATENBY

It was Alexander Brodie Spark, influential merchant of Sydney town, acquaintance of Wordsworth, and Director of the Bank of Australia, who named the confluence of Cooks River and Wolli Creek after the Vale of the Gods of Greek mythology. He loved the place so much he built a beautiful Italianate villa there in 1836 and called it 'Tempe'. It was designed by the celebrated colonial architect John Verge, who also designed Elizabeth Bay House, Tusculum, and Lyndhurst.

This place, with its unique history and riverbank location, is one of those little patches of Sydney that State planning policy ought to zealously preserve. Unfortunately it's in imminent danger from completely inappropriate development.

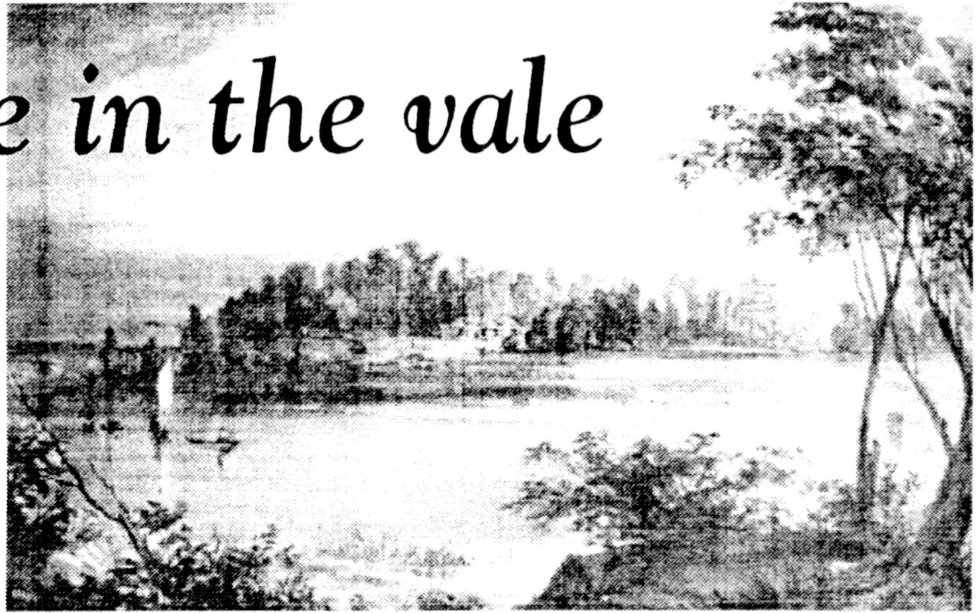
Spark kept a topical diary of the life of Sydney in which he wrote lyrically of his retreat. His garden, which ran to the edge of the river, was regarded as an ornament to Sydney and the finest private collection of plants in the colony, but the estate was more than this – it was one of the cradles of landscape painting in Australia. Spark was a patron to the young Samuel Elyard and later to Conrad Martens, who both painted Tempe. In fact, it was sketched and painted by all the noted colonial artists, including Skinner Prout, John Glover and John James Clark, and these works have left an unrivalled record of the home in its garden setting.

Sydneysiders and visitors to the colony often walked all the way from the New Town (Newtown) to the little rise on the north side of the river to gaze over Spark's retreat and the countryside beyond. Thomas Henry Huxley, Governor George Gipps, Rolf Boldrewood and Captain Charles Sturt were amongst those who visited the house.

Later, as Sydney spread south, the suburb on the northern bank of the river took the name Tempe.

After Spark's death the villa was briefly occupied by Caroline Chisholm, who used it as a girls' boarding school. Still later it passed into the possession of the Sisters of the Good Samaritan and became an institute for wayward girls. The sisters maintained the house in good condition and in 1888 they built a very fine chapel in the grounds.

Today, thanks to the construction of Wolli Creek railway station and the clearing of old industrial buildings, Tempe House can be appreciated in the round for the first time in decades. It is possible to walk the 260 metres of



Tempe House by Conrad Martens, 1845. Now in the National Library of Australia.

foreshore between the Princes Highway and the Illawarra railway line, and imagine the house restored to the romantic garden setting that Spark created – backdropped by a curtain of green in the style of Stourhead Park. It's our last opportunity to restore a Verge house to its proper setting. All his other Sydney homes – widely regarded as the best domestic architecture in the first 50 years of European settlement – are now closely encroached by later development.

You can now imagine Tempe House as a garden gateway to southern Sydney: one of those patches of sylvan beauty which testify to civic pride and a respect for history and place but that, alas, is not what is being prepared.

What the developers have in mind is not a curtain of green but a curtain wall of concrete and glass, rising on a podium of car parks. They envisage apartments 12 storeys tall, tracing a shallow arc from the Princes Highway to the edge of the Cooks River, visually crushing Tempe House and overshadowing the sliver of garden left to it.

This proposal sets the theme for the proposed redevelopment of North Arncliffe by Interciti@Arncliffe – a front name for the

Canberra-based developer Landco. It raises urgent planning and environment issues facing our city.

First there is the 'rail village' concept – potentially one Sydney's planning salvations. The concept is of nodes of mixed-use development, with medium density residential, commercial, and appropriate light industrial development within walking distance of railway stations. The intention is to reduce car dependency by offering easy home-to-workplace travel.

The developer's glossy handouts disarm the unwary by slyly building on the village theme: "People will love it. Like they do Balmain. A quick hop into the city, yet handy to parkland, river and facilities" enthused one real estate agent. Master planner Nick Hollow talks of creating a "vision" and wants to "articulate why an area is special", citing Paddington, Leichhardt and Newtown as inspirations. Interciti's development manager told the *Herald* he wanted to emulate the ambience of Balmain.

They paint a picture which would be wonderful if it were true – these much-loved suburbs typically feature residential dwellings

Please come along and help refill the Society's fighting fund!

Friday 20 October

7.00 pm for 7.30 pm

Wolli Creek Preservation Society Inc.

Annual Dinner

Speaker: Dr James Broadbent

The dinner is our most important annual fundraising event. Dr Broadbent, an eminent historian, lecturer and curator will speak on Tempe House and early colonial society.

Fill in the form that comes with this newsletter.

and retail precincts of two or three storeys. But what the developers and Rockdale Council want to cram into the tiny North Arncliffe precinct storeys high, or higher, perched on two or three floors of car park. The *Herald's* real estate writer put their plan more honestly when he wrote: "How's this for a vision? A brand new city, rivalling Chatswood ..."

The other major issue is that the proposal to build apartments right to the bank of Cooks River contravenes good environmental and planning practice. River foreshores and floodplains are precious places that ought to be preserved for public recreation and the restoration of natural ecosystems.

Nothing could do more to incite public opposition to the rail village concept than for the State Government to sanction car-based vertical sprawl every bit as self-defeating as the old suburban sprawl. Realising the promise of the rail village is a complex task in which intimacy of scale and mixed-use development are the defining elements. Of course the envelope of the form should be elastic, but there must be realistic restrictions on building height based on respect for natural and cultural heritage. Zones of high public value should be off-limits.

The area of North Arncliffe that ought to be preserved from all development is not large. It amounts to about 4 hectares comprising the environs of Tempe House and the 120 metre stretch of foreshore lying between the new Wolli Creek station and Cooks River. It is not a big ask.

We must assume that developers will always try to maximise profit (while mouthing all the correct planning slogans) but they cannot claim that the value of the land in question dictates the height to which they must build, because the value of the land is limited by what planning policy allows them to build there.

North Arncliffe is a test case for good urban redevelopment. It is too important to be left to the whim of developers, or entrusted to a council so blinded by a desire for development that it will ignore its own guidelines and the wishes of residents in order to get it. The Premier, Bob Carr, has flagged his interest in the quality of our urban form. He could do worse than to turn his attention to the excesses of the North Arncliffe masterplan and move swiftly to preserve Tempe House and its environs for the nation.

An edited version of this article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 24 July 2000.

In mid April A Public Meeting to Save Tempe House & Foreshores

This meeting will be organised by the National Trust. Please come along and show your support for saving not only Tempe House, but restoring its original picturesque garden setting.

Phone 9567 8502 after the Olympics for details



The WCPS wrote to the Historic Houses Trust of NSW asking for an estimation of the significance of Tempe House. We received this reply from Director Peter Watts.

☪ The Historic Houses Trust is aware of the proposals for development around this important house. The Trust does not normally comment on such proposals. However I believe that an exception can be made in this instance for a number of reasons. First, the Trust is the owner of several properties designed by John Verge including Elizabeth Bay House, Lyndhurst and Elizabeth Farm. Second, the Trust has published the definitive books about John Verge and his work – *The Golden Decade of Australian Architecture – The Work of John Verge* (1978) and also *The Australian Colonial House – Architecture and Society in NSW 1788–1842* (1997). Thirdly, the Trust has arranged the major exhibitions about the work of John Verge. This gives us a unique perspective on the work of this very significant colonial architect.

John Verge produced the most sophisticated houses in Australia in its first fifty years of colonial settlement. They are of an extraordinarily high quality and all those that remain are of immense significance. Because so many of them were in what is now the inner city they have been lost or been the subject of intense urban development and as a consequence had their settings utterly and irreversibly altered. These include Elizabeth Bay House, Lyndhurst, Barham, Rockwall, Tusculum and Rose Bay Lodge. At Lyndhurst the Trust had to spend large amounts of money to buy back a tiny amount of land to at least provide some garden setting and at Elizabeth Bay House we have unsuccessfully tried various means over the years to try and retrieve more space around the house. Tempe is one of the few Verge houses that remains whose earlier setting is still legible and where the house can still be appreciated "in the round". Views, both to and from the house, though abused over the years, remain a great part of its potential and its joy.

It would be a tragedy if the damage perpetrated on so many other Verge houses was allowed to be repeated at Tempe. Surely we have learnt something from the disastrous planning decisions of the past and have learnt to be more respectful and sensitive to those rare and precious places from our history. Tempe even gave the suburb its name. Could there be a greater indictment on our current planning if Tempe was allowed to be swallowed up in a semi-circle of high rise totally and forever denying the opportunity for it to be appreciated in a more appropriate setting? Would the community in fifty years time have to try and do what so many others are currently doing, at great cost, to try and buy back the settings of these places?

Tempe is, and should be, one of the most special assets of both the local and broader communities. It deserves to be treated in a manner consistent with its significance and in a way that will not destroy a setting that has lasted since the house was built 164 years ago. ☪

Things you can do to help save Tempe House

■ Join the Tempe House & Foreshores Alliance. We need people to help in a variety of ways. Phone Gavin or Lee on 9567 8502 or 041 767 4080.

■ Write to:

- The Hon Robert Carr, MP, Premier, Parliament House, Macquarie Street, Sydney NSW 2000. Phone: 9228 5239, Fax: 9228 3933
Email: bob.carr@parliament.nsw.gov.au
- The Hon Andrew Refshauge, MP, Minister for Urban Affairs & Planning, Parliament House, Macquarie Street Sydney NSW 2000. Phone: 9558 9000
Fax: 9957 2145. Email: aRefshauge@parliament.nsw.gov.au
- Mr George Thompson MP, Shop 3A, 452 Princes Highway, Rockdale, NSW 2216.
Phone 9597 1414. Fax 9567 0508.

■ Write to:

- *Sydney Morning Herald*. Fax: 9282 3492. Email: letters@smh.fairfax.com.au
- *Daily Telegraph*. Fax 9288 2300. Email: dtmltr@matp.newsld.com.au
- *St George Leader*. Fax 9598 3987