

Real Estate

HOMES AND PROPERTY Daily Telegraph MAY 10, 2003



Period drama

Sense of history: heritage advocate Ted Cassidy and wife Anna outside their restored Federation home. He says such buildings are an invaluable record of our past and must be protected

Love them or hate them, there's no ignoring them in Sydney. Heritage homes — in particular those from the Federation era — are everywhere.

We may be living in the 21st century, where technology has elevated design to dizzy new heights, but when it comes to houses, those from bygone eras are enjoying unprecedented popularity. Heritage, demand would dictate, is the look du jour.

Many advocates see their role in restoring and protecting heritage housing as essential to maintaining an historical record of earlier eras. Others simply like the decorative aspects of various styles.

But not everyone is swept up in the protection and revival of all things old world.

Some members of Sydney's architectural community deplore the blanket preservation of northern hemisphere imports, saying it reeks of cultural insecurity and a lack of confidence in contemporary design.

They concede some stunning examples are beautifully built and should be restored as a chronicle of their times, but they argue that in general the houses do not suit the Australian climate.

Even worse, they say, Sydney's love affair with heritage is spawning a new style of "fake Federation" — the result of developers flogging replicas of period properties.

Royal Institute of Architects (NSW Chapter) president Caroline Pidcock says a Federation home can only be called so if it was built at the time when the states of Australia were

Sydney's love affair with heritage housing may be preventing our city forging its own architectural identity. NICOLETTE CASELLA reports

unified. Any rehashed version could only be a rip-off of the original.

"The heritage of tomorrow is the best architecture of today," Pidcock says.

"A confident country and economy understand our time has merit. It's quite backward-looking to be building a replica from an era when building materials and labour were entirely different and a lot less sophisticated than now."

Pidcock says many period homes did not respond to our warmer climate or support Australian outdoor living.

"A lot of rooms are small and poorly ventilated. They lack sunlight and are freezing in winter," he says.

Vast changes in social agenda since the turn of the last century have also made the traditional floorplan of many older houses redundant. "Separate pokey living areas are not functional today. Families like open-plan living areas to increase interaction," Pidcock says.

She concedes that certain buildings from the past — either ones that record a time or are examples of a particular style — are important. But she says there is no need to live in the past and councils that introduced blanket heritage have gone too far.

"I think a number of councils have reacted in an extreme way after several decades of

not looking after buildings in their areas. The pendulum has swung the other way and they are creating a situation that inhibits the heritage of tomorrow."

World-famous architect Harry Seidler is not so diplomatic.

While he stresses he would protect some Sydney heritage homes with his life, he says the preservation of all things old has become a "cultural disease and councils are infected by it".

He believes heritage has become a "stand-off tactic" on the part of local government to delay any development applications.

He describes councils demanding homeowners wanting to develop their sites spend thousands of dollars on heritage experts to meet requirements for development approval as absurd.

"There is definitely an obsession going on. Contemporary architecture is forbidden — it's like it's a crime to try to build a modern home," Seidler says. "We are not allowed to forge our own identity. It's mindless."

Jennifer Hill, a director of Architectural Projects, who acts as a consultant to many councils, agrees the problem with heritage is the bureaucracy of how it is managed.

"Restricting colour schemes and forcing people to do additions in a style that does not reflect the current state of heritage is crazy,"

she says. "It shows an absolute lack in confidence in contemporary architecture and a fear of change."

Hill also has a gripe with councils spending too much time administering the preservation of heritage buildings at the expense of the rest of the municipality.

"Why shouldn't other areas be considered equally?" she asks.

There is no better example of an area more heritage-rich and proud of it than Sydney's first garden suburb, Haberfield.

In 1985, Ashfield Council introduced its environmental plan to ensure the absolute preservation of all houses in the suburb, which has many stunning examples of both the Federation and Californian bungalow style of housing.

Under its heritage guidelines, the council prohibits the building of two-storey houses and won't allow for houses to be demolished (without extreme justification).

If you want to paint your house, you are not allowed to unless you use council-specified Federation colours.

Long-time Haberfield resident and Ashfield councillor Ted Cassidy argues the strict rules exist so that while looking to the future, we do not forget the past.

"Haberfield is not a museum," he says.

Cassidy, who was elected on a heritage platform, was part of the original group that

Continued Page 2