FIRST GOVERNMENT HOUSE SITE
WHOSE CULTURAL VALUES?

Peter Watts

When I was asked by Joan Domicelj if I would organise this conference I agreed because I saw it as an opportunity to explore an issue which the Trust was having to develop, ie Whose Cultural values? It was not something that had confronted us quite so directly before. But it is a question that has been interesting us in recent times as we have had to come to grips with the development of a museum on the site of Australia’s First Government House.

It has been encouraging to have had so much thoughtful discussion today and yesterday which has helped to inform and amplify this issue and to know that there are others who are also grappling with this issue. The richness, diversity and passion of opinion generated by this conference has been beyond my expectation and hopefully will be reflected in the manner in which this new museum develops.

For those of you who know nothing of this project, let me give you a brief background.

In late January 1788 a strangely attired British naval captain with the title “Governor and Commander in Chief”, plus about 1000 convicts and marines landed just a short distance from here at a place not previously visited by Europeans - though the home of the Eora people.

That Governor built himself a house in that first year, a two storey brick house of British ancestry. There he and his successors and their families lived, gradually changing and expanding the house and its grounds, until it was demolished 58 years later in 1846.

It was more than just another house with its associated grounds and outbuildings. As the house and office of an autocratic colonial ruler, it had significant associations with the social, political, economic, cultural and environmental changes of this period. It became the focus of a new civilisation which rapidly submerged the civilisation that had existed in this place for thousands of years.

After its demolition in 1846, the site was almost forgotten until 10 years ago archaeologists discovered the foundations of the house. Excavations have continued since, yielding extensive in situ evidence of the house and its outbuildings and over 1 million artefacts.

Then follows a long and complex story which I won’t go into other than to say the result has been a decision to build a so called commemorative museum on the site immediately adjacent to, indeed interconnected to, a new high rise office tower. This new museum will be opened in 1995.

Enter the Historic Houses Trust having been given responsibility by the NSW government for developing this museum.

Hence our interest in developing the theme of this conference.

The reason is, I suppose, obvious. Whose cultural values should be reflected in this museum?

1. Should it be those who have been largely responsible for ensuring the preservation of the site, and who wanted, and lobbied for the funds to build a museum?

Broadly, but by no means exclusively, this group represents those with family connections to those early colonial years and people interested in colonial history.
2. Or should it be those who seem to be the most empowered in this city, the professional and other special interest groups who have developed a special interest in the site:

- the archaeologists
- museologists in all their guises - boards/directors/curators/conservators and so on
- architects and urban planners
- educators
- connoisseurs
- architectural and social historians
- politicians

and on it goes

3. Or should it be the representatives of those people who were invaded and whose ghastly displacement and destruction began in 1788? There is little of their surviving material culture so why should their cultural values be reflected?

4. Or should it be those who have something to say about the ideas, the issues and the values which are symbolically imbued in this site and which are relevant to this place and to Australians today.

Both Humphrey McQueen and John Eddy, amongst others, spoke of this idea yesterday.

By ideas/issues and values I mean things like:

- migration and multiculturalism about which Viv Sezekeres spoke yesterday
- aboriginal issues of treaties and reconciliation
- monarchy and republicism
- and other issues about the nature of our society

I suppose some of these are the things Konai Helu Thaman described yesterday as the "intangible aspects of our cultural history".

The answer as to Whose Cultural Values? hopefully lies within the identified significance of the site.

There can be little doubt that the most potent and provocative significance of the First Government House site is as a symbol of British colonisation of Australia in 1788 and its subsequent role as the seat of British authority in the colony.

In saying this I stress that I say it as an Australian - not as a descendant of a British immigrant - not as an apologist for their dreadful mistakes - nor as a celebrant for their spreading the better aspects of British civilisation. I simply say it as an Australian from a diverse, mixed exuberant, multicultural society trying to look back objectively at a set of circumstances which took place a long time ago.

To Australians, in all their forms, in the 1990s, the symbolism of this site will mean different things.

- imperial invasion
- imperial glorification and expansion
- environmental destruction
- genocide
- penal oppression
- social experiment
- safety, freedom, hope and opportunities

Hence the First Government House site has the opportunity to become a symbol of different perspectives on how we see ourselves as Australians today.

If this place and its new museum is to achieve its full and existing potential it must be - indeed it has a responsibility to be - a place which encourages and allows the fullest of debate and exposition about the British inheritance in the Australian experience.

Inevitably there are times when this will be painful to some - but celebratory to others - and vice versa. If it is not, then it may easily lack relevance and meaning and should again ask itself the question - Whose Cultural Values does it represent?

As John Eddy so wisely said yesterday "museums with scholarship, technology and showmanship have a widespread opportunity to promote revision, reimagining and eventually reconciliation".

I hope we can rise to the challenge.

Thank you.