Letters

Editor

Although I acclaim the proposed conservation of the site of New South Wales's first Government House (Historic Environment Vol. 4, No. 4 Helen Temple, A use fit for a Governor) I question Miss Temple's assertions of the far-reaching rewards of archaeologically investigating the site. Miss Temple confidently assures us that 'the sorts of subjects which could be expanded on this site include:

- acclimatisation of the early settlers: innovation and adaption of resources, techniques etc.
- changing status and popular perception of the colonial administration
- colonial marketing/trading networks
- socio-economic ranking
- spatial dynamics in building layout
- municipal growth'.

Perhaps I am sceptical, possibly cynical, or perhaps - although I am an architectural historian with a particular interest in early colonial domestic architecture - I am simply obtuse, but I doubt if the study of the evidence on site, the fragments of this one building, no matter how emotive and important, can illuminate all these profound subjects. I do not doubt that the study of these subjects can illuminate the findings at First Government House.

Considering Miss Temple's fields of study, I can see how, by confirming what we know (viz: the house had a verandah added to it, that bricks of uneven quality were made from clay, stone was used and lime was scarce etc.) that the 'acclimatisation' of the leading official in the colony can be illustrated, but I fail to understand how the foundations and deposits can elucidate to any worthwhile degree the study of the popular perception of the colonial administration - although, again, they might illustrate some small aspects of that study. Surely a review of a few colonial newspapers would be far more illuminating and reliable, on this and certainly on colonial marketing and trading networks, than all the shards on the Government House site. As to 'socio-economic ranking' I presume this means that the archaeological investigations will provide urgently needed confirmation that servants lived in smaller, less comfortable accommodation that the governor, but I can only guess at the meaning of 'spatial dynamics in building layout'. Does this mean that the site will tell us how and why colonial buildings were planned as they were, in all their diverse forms?

The archaeological investigations of the site directed by Miss Anne Bickford have been meticulous and impressive, and I am sure will continue to be, as indeed the site is impressive and evocative far beyond its size, but Miss Temple assumes too much for her craft. Even if the building was extant, and furnished, I would not, for my discipline, make such exaggerated claims for the possibilities in interpreting it. Perhaps archaeologists are more clairvoyant than architectural historians; they certainly appear more confident of their runic powers.

Surely it is unwise, unwarrantable - and unnecessary - to promote archaeology as such a nostrum.

James Broadbent,
Mulgoa
The Editor

I refer to James Broadbent's letter of 25 February 1986, following my article on First Government House Site, Sydney, and thank you for the opportunity to reply.

The editorial committee of *Historic Environment* is to be congratulated for recognising a need and devoting an issue of the journal to archaeology. There exists within the conservation movement, the public at large and indeed in the minds of many archaeologists, confusion of the role and contribution which archaeological research can make to the social sciences and to conservation and interpretation programmes. There have been, in particular circumstances, overzealous claims for and unrealistic expectations of archaeological investigations.

Mr Broadbent seems to assume that archaeologists work alone in analysing material from historic sites. I am not suggesting that crystal ball in hand, archaeologists can provide definitive statements on the suggested topics. These would, in any case, be determined by the orientation of the research design for the particular site.

The analysis of archaeological material is a multi-disciplinary activity. The preliminary research proposals for First Government House Site involve a team of archaeologists, historians, architectural historians, conservators, etc. The analysis project will not be a question simply of 'studying the fragments of this one building'. In order to explain the excavated material, the project must concentrate on selected data from the site, relate this to material from other sites and their own historical context.

Historic site archaeology in this country cannot yet lay claim to a broad academic base or major research achievements. This is partly because of its relative youth and severe limits on resources. But it is also because despite repeated attempts, public archaeologists, including myself, have not yet been successful in obtaining funding to complete the few major government projects undertaken to date. Hence it is not possible to demonstrate publicly the products and conclusions of such projects. For example, the Mint and Hyde Park Barracks investigation, undertaken in 1980, can make little progress with one part-time research worker employed during 1985 (for the first time), and no firm commitment for further funding in 1986. Consequently, the material from these sites still retains only the potential to contribute information to archaeology and other disciplines.

Archaeological techniques have been most widely used to answer questions posed by practitioners of other disciplines; for example, conservation architects at Port Arthur, Tasmania; landscape architects at Vaucluse House, NSW; and historians at Addington House, Ryde, NSW. As such, archaeology does make a documented, though small, contribution to conservation programmes which can grow in the future with the release of adequate funds.

Mr Broadbent remarks that claims for archaeology are 'too ambitious'. However, his own use of words like 'clairvoyant', 'runic' and 'nostrum', only exacerbates an age-old image for archaeology, propagated not by archaeologists but by an imaginative public and continued in myths like the Curse of Tutankhamun's tomb, books like Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*, and films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

As a public archaeologist, one of my responsibilities is to promote archaeology as well as the work of my colleagues in the field and ultimately to strive for greater recognition for an often overlooked aspect of Australia's environmental heritage. I can only reiterate that historic sites are a valuable source of information and scholars from a variety of different backgrounds will profit from using this material, as will historical and anthropological research. This idea has been promoted by others. Mr Broadbent should be referred to the Editorial of last year's *Historic Environment* Vol. 4 No. 4, in which my article appeared.

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