

Lest We Forget

George Tibbits

Gary Deirmendjian (ed.)
SYDNEY SANDSTONE

Craftsman House, \$88hb, 141pp, 1 877004 09 X

Peter Reynolds, Lesley Muir and Joy Hughes
JOHN HORBURY HUNT:

RADICAL ARCHITECT 1838–1904

Historic Houses Trust of NSW, \$54.95pb, 166pp, 0 949753 97 1

THE CAMERA HAS BEEN with architecture since the first shot. It simulates the Eye of God, enabling us to see what we might otherwise miss. In the folklore of the architectural profession, God is in even the most infinitesimal detail. This places a fearful responsibility on the architect and builder. The camera, with its powerful lens, zooms in on a building. It is impossible to imagine that anyone looking at the cover of *Sydney Sandstone* might think of damaging such a small but imaginative detail of fine craftsmanship. And so the camera, with quiet hubris and artistic delight, wins us even before the book is opened on its ‘act of pure indulgence ... offered in the name of those who appreciate our sandstone works, who preach their value and who endeavour to protect them for generations to come’.

In a different but equally compelling way, the camera is the eye through which we are able to appreciate the great Sydney-based architect John Horbury Hunt (1838–1904), in whose memory both an exhibition (at the Museum of Sydney, August to December 2002) and this fine book pay homage. Though some of his buildings still stand, one, captured with fuzzy figures and unmade grounds, Booloominbah of the 1880s, now the administrative offices of the University of New England at Armidale, is like a becalmed architectural ghost glimpsed in the mist of time past. The camera has us looking at an architectural and social culture long gone.

Sydney Sandstone, ‘the act of pure indulgence’, is a fine collection of colour photographs by Gary Deirmendjian of buildings and details built of, or faced with, sandstone quarried from around Sydney. They are grouped in what might be called photographic essays: Places of Learning, Places of Worship, Public Buildings, Commerce and Trade, and, as a holdall for what is left, Out and About and Greater Sydney. Between these groups are short essays on different aspects of sandstone. Among the photographs there are a few reminders of changing times: among the places of learning are the old Darlinghurst gaol and the Marine Services building on Circular Quay. There is also hidden humour: a splendid axial view of the old sandstone GPO has the cenotaph in Martin Place in the foreground on which are the sacred words ‘Lest We Forget’! Surprisingly, there is no section on Places of Residence.

The essays are written by five well-known contributors. Each is a personal, idiosyncratic and interesting response to a given topic. There is 'The Stone', an account of the origin of the stone by Tim Flannery; 'Hewing the Stone' by Shirley Fitzgerald; 'Architecture' by Philip Cox; 'Attitudes' by James Broadbent (which begins, wonderfully, with 'Traditionally Sydney has been a warm, buff-coloured city, Melbourne a city of dark, cold grey [bluestone]'); and 'Shaping the Stone' by Debby Cramer. The substratum of *Sydney Sandstone* is an old Arts and Crafts and Gothic Revival belief that the spirit of a place is uniquely defined, among other things, by its natural building materials. It is a destiny that a city cannot escape, and so the lovely Yellow Block sandstone speaks of a sunny Sydney, and bluestone warns of a drab Melbourne. Deirmendjian's introduction contains a statement of ideology from those old architectural movements, generalised into a universal: 'Sandstone gave early Sydney the gift of a unique and overriding aesthetic character. The great lessons of western architecture ... are stated [in Sydney] with a strictly local accent through the extensive use of sandstone.' Other materials, such as clay for making bricks — a somewhat ubiquitous industry in the Sydney region — take second place to the unique sandstone in defining the true architectural character appropriate to the city. Manufactured materials such as steel are false to the spirit of place.

The ideology of the Arts and Crafts Movement and the Gothic Revival are also buried deep in the fine eulogy to *John Horbury Hunt: Radical Architect 1838–1904*. Three acknowledged authorities on the architect — Peter Reynolds, Lesley Muir and Joy Hughes — have come together to give a sensitive account of Hunt's life and work, supported by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales as publisher. Hunt was born in Canada. In 1849 his family moved to Boston. Hunt began his architectural training in 1856 and worked with one of Boston's leading architects, Edward Clarke Cabot. The practice languished during the American Civil War, and Hunt decided to go to India. When he arrived in Sydney, on 5 January 1863, he opted to stay, joined the office of Edmund Blacket, thus entering a practice with a wide range of commissions in domestic, commercial, church and institutional work.

In 1869 Hunt was in private practice and was lucky enough to have an increasing circle of wealthy clients for whom he designed large houses, including Booloominbah for Robert White. This sounds like a brilliant career, but Hunt had a difficult personality and, as Peter Watts neatly puts it in his foreword, was querulous and supremely tactless. He seems to have been his own worst enemy. For a time, Hunt was president of the NSW Institute of Architects, and his behaviour created something of a public scandal. It was to this side of Hunt that I was introduced in the 1960s while reading old building journals that reported with sarcastic wit and exasperation Hunt's goings on at the NSW Institute. I discovered that in 1888 Hunt had designed a house in Brighton, so I went looking for it. I found the right address but, in my ignorance, I thought the house was from a much later period. It was the house for Phillis Spurling that is illustrated and described in the present book. Others have experienced this temporal disorientation with Hunt's work.

It is from Robin Boyd, writing fifty years ago, that the now pervasive notion comes that a few architects at the end of the nineteenth century sowed the seeds of modern architecture decades before modern architecture appeared. Boyd had little sympathy with the picturesque — an aesthetic disposition passed to him from his uncle Martin Boyd, who wrote passionately against it — and he excluded as anathema all such architecture of the 1880s. This left the chosen few, Boyd's proto-modernists of the 1880s, in whose buildings there was less of the dreaded picturesque than in the work of their equally talented but picturesque contemporaries. Hence Boyd missed the quirky Hunt who, we now know (thanks especially to the enthusiasm and research of Peter Reynolds), was a gifted architect who drew on a complex range of architectural sources. In his later works, for example, Hunt drew inspiration from the Arts and Crafts American Shingle Style, making him unique among his contemporaries. This fine eulogy helps place his work in the milieu of architectural movements and sources of his own time, rather than reading his work from the preconceptions of a later age.