

Speech – Clr Mary -Lou Jarvis OAM
Unveiling of a plaque for
Professor Leslie Wilkinson OBE Architect and academic
April 29 2024

Thank you Jody.

Again, may I offer Mayor Shield's apologies for not being able to attend today.

I am delighted to be here, as the local Vaucluse ward Councillor and also because this is the home of one of my dear friends and in a past life over 5 years I was the Legal Counsel and then NSW State Manager of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects where Professor Wilkinson was much revered by the members of his profession.

I want to extend a warm welcome to all our guests family and friends. We are joined this morning by:

- Former Mayor Chris Dawson
- Our Guest Speaker, Professor Andrew Leach of the School of Architecture, Design and Planning at the University of Sydney, who is also representing the Dean of Architecture, Professor Robyn Dowling;
- Elisabeth O'Connor, **Watsons Bay and Vaucluse Social History Group.**

- Adam Haddow, President of the **Royal Australian Institute of Architects,**
- Peter Poland **Royal Australian Historical Society**
- **The Hon Ashley Dawson Damer AM** the owner of Greenway
- Philip Wilkinson representing the **family of Professor Wilkinson**
- Rev Matt Aroney, acting Rector of **St Michael's Church Vaucluse and St Peter's Watsons Bay**

While today we are unveiling our 45th plaque, this will be the first to honour the life and work of a local architect. When in 1970 Professor Leslie Wilkinson received an honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of Sydney, he was credited with ‘a notable series of firsts’

- *“the first Professor of Architecture in Australia,*
- *the first Dean*
- *the first registration on the roll of the Board of Architects’ roll,*
- *the first Gold Medallist of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects...*

He was also the first president of the NSW State chapter of the Institute.

So it is in keeping with the course set by Leslie Wilkinson that he is the first architect to receive a plaque under this scheme. We are honoured that the Woollahra Council area boasts the largest collection of residential buildings designed by him in Australia.

We will hear more of Leslie Wilkinson's broad contribution to his profession from our Guest Speaker, but I would like to highlight a little of his legacy in Woollahra.

Leslie Wilkinson was a Wentworth Road resident for fifty years, but his impact went beyond longevity of residence. The English born and educated Wilkinson wholeheartedly embraced life in Vaucluse with his family's move to the district.

He was a sociable community member, known in his early years of residence for navigating the harbour foreshores in a small rowboat, making calls throughout the neighbourhood.

Wilkinson took an active interest in local matters and civic affairs, his concern for the 'welfare of the district' noted in Vaucluse Council minutes.

And in terms of an enduring legacy, through his private practice, Leslie Wilkinson was responsible for numerous twentieth-century landmarks of Woollahra's built environment.

While the demand for Wilkinson's abilities was widespread, many of his private clients were Woollahra-based.

A list written in the architect's hand, discovered among his papers, identified 58 projects undertaken within this municipality, and a recent study by Council's planners significantly expanded the number of local sites for which we can now claim a Wilkinson association.

Only last month his architectural contributions to our area had been

recognised following Council's "Professor Leslie Wilkinson in Woollahra" heritage study and a further 5 of buildings attributed to

him listed as local heritage items in the *Woollahra Local Environmental Plan 2014* (see [Amendment No 34](#)¹), adding to the 28 Buildings already listed in the 1995 and 2014 Woollahra LEP.

The most recent listed sites are found across the breadth of our municipality – from Darling Point to Woollahra, Bellevue Hill to Vaucluse and onto Watsons Bay.

Much of his work, here and elsewhere, survives, and is in many cases heritage-listed – a testament to its timeless worth in the eyes of experts, owners and the community at large.

His legacy of design excellence is not confined to buildings. Prominent on the foreshore of Watsons Bay is his handsome and distinctive monument honouring Robert Watson, for whom the

¹

- "House, including interiors and gardens" at 43 Latimer Road, Bellevue Hill [Lot A, DP 312687; Lot 1, DP 318717; Lot 1, DP 131019]
- "Hampden Lodge, including house, interiors and garage" at 12 Hampden Avenue, Darling Point [Lot 1, DP 1184885]
- "Wrought iron gate and brick posts" 28A Wentworth Road, Vaucluse [Part of Lot 2, DP 531931]
- "Monument to Robert Watson, including sandstone tablet, carvings and setting" 22 Military Rd, Watsons Bay (within Robertson Park) [Part of Lot 7093, DP 1074769]
- "House, including interiors" 56 Wallaroy Road, Woollahra [Lot 3, DP 17153]

bay is named. This work was the initiative of the *Royal Australian Historical Society*, brought to fruition in collaboration with Vacluse Council, which commissioned Leslie Wilkinson to provide the design.

Both the first-built and the last-built of Wilkinson's Sydney houses stand in Vacluse. The first was his own house *Greenway*, built in 1922. The last was a house built in 1969 at The Crescent for Antony Coote who, it is said, wanted 'a Wilkinson house' because he had grown up beside one in Bellevue Hill. His inspiration was No 14 Ginahgulla Road, one of Wilkinson's personal favourites, designed in 1936 for newlyweds June Bailleau and Samuel Horder.

In 1936, the young June Bailleau's chief requirement was for her new home to be 'similar in feel' to her architect's own house – so when Wilkinson designed Coote's Vacluse home, thirty-three years later, it brought full circle a cycle of local and loyal appreciation for his domestic architecture.

The various clusters of Wilkinson houses throughout our municipality reinforce this sense of a clientele built on local admiration, and neighbourly recommendation. We also know from accounts that friends became clients and many clients became friends.

Wilkinson was twice awarded the Sulman Medal, the most prestigious NSW architecture award, and each time for work in

this municipality – In 1934, the medal recognised the exceptional merit of the Wilkinson-designed house at No 6 Wiston Gardens, Double Bay. In 1942, the award commended projects carried out between 1929 and 1937 at St Michael’s Church Vaucluse being sensitive extensions to the famed Sir Edmund Blackett’s original design.

What first brought Professor Wilkinson to our area is uncertain but an intriguing possibility was that the seeds were sown earlier, in England by Professor Frederick Moore Simpson, head of Architecture at University College London. Simpson urged and aided his assistant of 10 years in his 1918 application for the Sydney position, and it is very likely that they spoke of Simpson’s commission, twenty-one years earlier, from Sydney retailer Frederic Lassetter, to build a house in Double Bay. That house was *St Brigid’s*, well-known to present-day Woollahra residents as the former Woollahra Library and the current Woollahra Gallery.

So it was perhaps the opportunity to view, first-hand, an example of his former mentor’s work in an Australian setting, that sent Leslie Wilkinson on his first excursion east of the City.

The *Greenway* site was purchased in October 1921, and when Wilkinson submitted his building application to Vaucluse Council, he received, along with approval to build, a letter expressing Council’s appreciation of his actions “to preserve the beauty of

the district". The gesture was prompted by Council's Plans Committee, to acknowledge that Wilkinson's scheme for the site had carefully avoided the destruction of any of the trees on his land. And look at that wonderful legacy today with the stunning angophoras in the garden.

His regard for colonial architecture was no doubt the reason for naming the home *Greenway* after convict architect Frances Greenway.

The family - Leslie and Dorothy and children George and Bridget - moved into *Greenway* in 1922, where a third child, Elizabeth, was born. Wilkinson designed additions in the early 1950s to accommodate adult children, and the property remained in family hands long after his death – proof of how difficult it is to relinquish a Wilkinson house once you have lived in one.

Leslie Wilkinson himself died peacefully at *Greenway* in 1973, but his heritage to us, scattered throughout our local area, stands firm over fifty years later. It has been the home to other creatives – two time Oscar winner Jane Campion (of *Power of the Dog* and *The Piano* fame) and since 2001 to author and former NGA and AGNSW director and patron to the arts the Hon Ashley Dawson Damer AM.

I would now like to introduce Professor Andrew Leach to tell us more about the career and contribution of Professor Leslie Wilkinson

Our Guest Speaker joined the University of Sydney in 2016 as Professor of Architecture and Research Director for Architectural Theory and History. He came to this position via a series of fellowships, and in 2018 held a Wallace Scholarship at the Harvard Center for Renaissance Studies, *Villa I Tatti*. A published author, Professor Leach is currently the editor-in-chief of *Architectural Theory Review*. Please welcome him.

Guest speaker Professor Andrew Leach delivers a speech on Leslie Wilkinson.

Cr Jarvis responds to the Guest Speaker:

Thank you, Professor Leach for sharing the story of Professor Leslie Wilkinson's achievements and legacy. I would now like to invite you and our nominator Graham Humphrey, to join me in unveiling this plaque.

Cr Jarvis, assisted by Graham Humphrey and Professor Leach, unveils the plaque. End of formal unveiling event