

The Roxy Theatre, Wavertree and Broughton House

Contemporary Architectural Heritage Battles in Parramatta

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Over the past eight years, Parramatta has undergone a major urban transformation which continues with plans for more residential development, new hotels, offices and retail buildings, along with the construction of the Parramatta station of Sydney Metro West. Celebrating the completion of the \$3.5 billion Parramatta Square precinct in March 2023, the then Lord Mayor Donna Davis proclaimed, “Parramatta is a city in a state of acceleration. We have truly come of age, attracting unprecedented population growth, talent and public and private investment. There’s nowhere else like it in Australia.”¹ The rate and scale of this development has placed the treatment and protection of some of the city’s heritage buildings into stark relief, perhaps no better illustrated than the ill-fate of the 140-year-old villa Willow Grove, which once stood on the site of the new Parramatta Powerhouse Museum. While it was initially protected from demolition under a CFMEU green ban, the ban was lifted in August 2021 and the mansion pulled down in accordance with a government plan for relocation, a project that was subsequently abandoned.

Parramatta. It outlines the history of the battle between heritage groups and the owner of the Roxy Theatre over appropriate uses of the building and the scale of change. State-heritage listed in 1999, the Roxy is recognised as holding “high cultural significance as a good and relatively intact representative example of the ‘Picture Palaces’ of the interwar period” and as an “excellent example of ‘Interwar Spanish Mission’ style, displaying features typical of this style but also with a notable individuality and quality of architectural design.”² After detailing the outcome of NSW Land and Environment Court proceedings regarding a 2018 proposed re-development of the building, the paper considers the latest development application submission, which represents the owner’s attempt to achieve a compromise in relation to the adaptive reuse of the theatre.

The paper then moves onto two other buildings in Parramatta, less publicly known, which also currently stand in a state of disrepair. Wavertree on New Zealand Street is a colonial sandstone Georgian villa (c. 1840) designed by the Parramatta-based architect James Houison. It is considered one of his most important villas due to its siting in the

1.

As quoted in Ronald Mizen, “Parramatta Comes of Age as Sydney’s Second CBD and Administrative Hub,” *Financial Review*, March 31, 2023, www.afr.com/policy/economy/parramatta-comes-of-age-as-sydney-s-second-cbd-and-administrative-hub-20230315-p5cs9k.

2.

NSW State Heritage Inventory no. 00711, www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5051406.

3.

John McClymont, James Houison, 1800–1876: *Parramatta’s Forgotten Architect* (Parramatta, NSW: Parramatta and District Historical Society, 2010), 80.



Figure 1:
Wavertree, Parramatta, New South Wales,
designed by James Houison (1800–1876).
(Photograph by Paul Hogben, September 2024)

landscape and fine detailing.³ Restored to an excellent condition by former owners, Wavertree was sold in 2012 and now displays serious signs of neglect (Figure 1). A 2022 newspaper article reported that a hole in its slate roof was allowing water to spill into the property and impact on the original timber fittings of the home.⁴

Like Wavertree, Broughton House on Thomas Street is in very poor condition. Built in 1838–39 to a design attributed to John Verge, the residence featured in Conrad Martens’s idyllic *View of Parramatta* 1839.⁵ Altered over time, the house is recognised within the NSW State Heritage Register (listed in 1999) as “a notable example of a Victorian Regency style house that reflects the social and economic status of the wealthier free settler who played an essential part in the establishment of New South Wales.”⁶ Today the faceted timber bays are deteriorating and steel posts hold up the front verandah. Despite community calls for action, it is feared the house may face “demolition by neglect” at the hands of developers.⁷

Each of these three cases raises issues with heritage protection, private property rights, and the ability of government

authorities to intervene to save some of the most endangered heritage buildings in Parramatta today. The paper brings all three together within a discussion of these issues as a way of calling attention to their current condition and the need for ongoing monitoring and action.

4.

Joanne Vella, “Fight to Save Wavertree Heritage House,” *Parramatta Advertiser*, March 28, 2022, 1.

5.

Conrad Martens, *View of Parramatta 1839*, watercolour and gouache on paper: see www.sl.nsw.gov.au/view-parramatta

6.

NSW State Heritage Inventory no. 01302, www.hms.heritage.nsw.gov.au/App/Item/ViewItem?itemId=5051402.

7.

Joanne Vella, “Community Calls to Save Heritage Property from ‘Demolition by Neglect,’” *Parramatta Advertiser*, March 13, 2023, 1.