

Heritage Referral Response

Application Number:	DA2021/2208
Date:	09/05/2022
To:	Nick England
Land to be developed (Address):	Lot 6 DP 3632 , 3 Riverview Road AVALON BEACH NSW 2107 Lot LIC 391482 , 3 Riverview Road AVALON BEACH NSW 2107

Officer comments

HERITAGE COMMENTS		
Discussion of reason for referral		
The proposal has been referred to Heritage as the subject property is a heritage item		
Little House ("Yoorami") - 3 Riverview Road, Avalon Beach		
Details of heritage items affected		
Details of the item as contained within the Pittwater inventory is as follows:		
<p><u>Statement of Significance</u> Little House (Yoorami) at 3 Riverview Road, Clareville, built c1965 to a design by the architect Douglas Snelling, has historic and aesthetic significance as an early example of Late Twentieth-Century Sydney Regional architecture showing direct influences by Frank Lloyd Wright. Typical modernist features include: horizontal emphasis in the structure, free asymmetrical massing, flat roof, clerestory windows, timber deck, exposed structure, retention and adaptation to the natural setting and use of natural materials. The residence portrays the early stages of a significant movement by Sydney architects to adapt the International style and design theory to a local, regional language.</p>		
<p><u>Physical Description</u> The house is located on a terraced sloped site covered with large rocks, trees and ferns with scenic views over Pittwater. The view from the street is screened by luxuriant vegetation creating a natural bush setting. It is not possible to see it from the public domain.</p> <p>The house is a one-storey, skillion roof building organised around a central patio with a pool. A little stream of water runs below the house that is gently adapted on the sandstone rocks facing the water. The property has four double bedrooms, five bathrooms, a billiard room, cellar, commercial kitchen, in-ground pool and guest/staff accommodation. It also includes boating facilities with a two-storey boat house, landing ramp, slipway and deepwater jetty with two mooring pens.</p> <p>Typical modernist features include: horizontal emphasis in the structure, free asymmetrical massing, flat roof, clerestory windows, timber deck, exposed structure, retention and adaptation to the natural setting and use of natural materials.</p>		
Other relevant heritage listings		
Sydney Regional Environmental Plan (Sydney Harbour Catchment) 2005	No	
Australian Heritage Register	No	

NSW State Heritage Register	No	
National Trust of Aust (NSW) Register		
RAIA Register of 20th Century Buildings of Significance	Yes	
Other		

Consideration of Application

This proposal for a new tennis court and associated facilities has been referred for heritage comment as it involves development within the site and setting of a house which is listed as a Heritage Item. The property has been the subject of a recent application for extensive alteration works, negotiated to an approval with Council staff. The proposed tennis court and facilities must be assessed for their impact on the significance of the property.

The house at No. 3 Riverview Road is known (and of heritage interest) as “Yoorami” or the Little House, and was designed for the owner and builder, Mr. Arthur Little, by the architect Douglas Snelling. A high profile, prominent and successful architect of prestigious homes in the 1960s and 70s, Snelling competed with other, well recognised architects of his time – Harry Seidler, Peter Muller, and Bruce Rickard, and employed others who subsequently became prominent, such as Vivian Fraser who documented the Little House for construction. He looked beyond Australia and having worked overseas, returning to Sydney at several stages of his career, brought wide-ranging international influences to Sydney, beyond Frank Lloyd Wright who influenced his contemporaries.

In previous comment upon the property for the earlier application (DA 2018/1616) made to Council for changes to the house and integrated outbuildings on the waterfront Pittwater Sound side of the property, the significance was commented on in more detail. In her PhD thesis on Snelling, and subsequent biography (obtained in research for this referral) Dr. Davina Jackson ranked the house as one of Snelling’s major works.

The application is supported by a Statement of Heritage Impact which concludes that the proposal retains the significance of the Item and its setting ; that the existing curtilage and visual setting of the house will not be affected ; that the design intent of the original architect is not diminished, and that the high architectural merit of the proposal will “enhance the understanding of the heritage item by creating a valuable contemporary layer executed in a cohesive manner with the work of the original architect Douglas Snelling”. These conclusions are not agreed with.

The present site characteristics of the property are not acknowledged in the report, nor helpfully interpreted. There is no front fence because it would appear, quite intentionally, none was built – in keeping with the “ill-defined” but intentional absence of fenced boundaries. The “street frontage-foreground” of the property appears to have always been grassed lawns, and remains so.

What appears obvious is that the house was intentionally set to the western waterfront side of the property and is effectively set behind a spatially luxurious, landscaped foreground, screening the house from view. There are no fences or gates. As noted, a hint of what is on the site is provided only by the exotically detailed “pagoda” letterbox beside the driveway entrance. The approach driveway crests before sweeping around to enter the vehicle forecourt and carport, from where the house itself is revealed. The absence of development in the eastern area of the site (apparent in successive aerial photos of the site) and an emphasis on spacious open, landscaping, appear intentional. In my opinion, this is consistent with the Californian Modernism with which Snelling was familiar.

This perspective suggests that development in the foreground area of the site should be carefully scaled, reticent, and not dominant of the approach and arrival experience of the house. The works will occasion the removal of the present entry drive and roundel, and the relocation of the original letterbox – which obviously should be retained as is proposed. It should not in my understanding, be sited on public land as shown.

The proposed palisade front fence and super-scaled entry arbour are not in my opinion, consistent with the significance and characteristics of the property, and will unreasonably change and dominate the presentation of the property to the street and the arrival experience to it. Landscaping could and should conceal the presence of fencing and of the proposed masonry base structure to the court. The overall character – form, materials, and shape of the proposed ground floor of the envisaged tennis pavilion owe little to the house proper, and do not defer to it, which it should. In my opinion it should not have large glazed openings presented to the approach drive.

While there will be a planning assessment of the proposal, considering amongst other things the impact of the proposal on the amenity of neighbours to the site, in heritage terms, for the introduction of a tennis court and services to be acceptable it is submitted that it must defer to the strong heritage values of the site and how these can be minimally affected by the facility. A more reticent design which responds to the characteristics of the property and respects its importance would have a greater chance of support. This is not a suggestion that the “style” of the pavilion should be consistent with the house ; it is the scale, bulk, materials and character of the pavilion that should avoid diminishing conflict and competition.

It is suggested that with regard to the court itself, the treatment of the masonry base which provides a level court surface plane, should be simple and avoid any fenestration to the approach drive. The arbour or pergola frame should be omitted from the proposal, and the court fence should be as simple in materials and construction as possible. Landscaping and particularly vegetation should act to conceal both the base and the court fence.

With regard to the pavilion, the upper floor should have a reduced presence, having a thin-edged roof and see-through walls to yield a minimal presence. The building should be seen behind the screening landscaping which is suggested to minimize the presence of the court. It should not make a statement which detracts from the house to which it is auxiliary, for this risks conflict with the significance and design statement which the heritage listed residence makes.

The location and treatment of the proposed bin store and of the front fence should also be reconsidered, so as to retain as much as possible, the apparent open-ness of the site. An alternative location for the bin store should not be difficult and avoid more built elements in the property frontage area. If envisaged for site security reasons, a suitable fence should be possible further into the property.

In summary, while the concept of a court and pavilion can be supported, the clear potential for conflict with heritage significance means that the design of the current proposal cannot be supported, and should be reconsidered and amended in response to the comments above.

In heritage terms, the proposal in its current form cannot be supported, without amendments for a better heritage outcome. These should be readily achievable, and may be assisted by further discussion with Council officers.

Is a Conservation Management Plan (CMP) Required? No. The significance of this property is such that it could have been requested.

Has a CMP been provided? No.

Is a Heritage Impact Statement required? Yes.

Has a Heritage Impact Statement been provided? Yes.

Comments on Amended Plans - 9 May 2022

I prefaced my initial comments on the proposal in the following terms :

“The application is supported by a Statement of Heritage Impact which concludes that the proposal retains the significance of the Item and its setting ; that the existing curtilage and visual setting of the house will not be affected ; that the design intent of the original architect is not diminished, and that the high architectural merit of the proposal will “enhance the understanding of the heritage item by creating a valuable contemporary layer executed in a cohesive manner with the work of the original architect Douglas Snelling”. These conclusions are not agreed with.”

I remain of those views, but acknowledge that amendments have been made in order to address, to some extent, the concerns that were conveyed. I have read Mr. Kovacs’ comments, and acknowledge my misassumption that the letterbox was to be relocated – and of course I support its retention in its current location. With regard to the amendments :

- the deletion of the arbour is most welcome and helpful ;
- the relocation of the bin space is similarly positive ;
- the reduction in size of the lower pavilion area windows, south elevation, is positive but I suggest they may helpfully hold more rigour and simplicity if all the same height and size (enlarge the smaller one);
- the reduction in height of the entry gate and street fence to 1000mm is welcome and helpful in reducing its intrusion ;
- the upstand of the upper pavilion level roof has been reduced by 100mm and is helpful, but the upper level of the pavilion will remain intrusive considering the qualities and significance of the front garden and landscape areas, in my opinion. A further and beneficial mitigation would be achieved by reducing the ceiling height, and thus the relative roof height, of the upper level which at almost 4.0metres internally, is very high and arguably capable of a significant reduction, at least 500mm, without harm to internal amenity.

Approaching a conclusion on this matter, what might be seen as the saving characteristics of the site of “Yoorami” in the considering this proposal are its topography and the substantial separation of the new facility from the house. Opinions will vary on the success of the new pavilion in heritage and design terms, and the acceptability of its impact upon the existing important house, but its impact will

at least be in part mitigated by the size of the site and the separation from the house.

In heritage terms, the impact of the proposal has been mitigated in part by the amendments adopted. A further beneficial change would be a reduction in the overall and ceiling heights of the pavilion's upper level, after which the proposed facility could be accepted while acknowledging the impacts upon the setting of "Yoorami" as being of a level of minor harm.

Further Comments

COMPLETED BY: Robert Moore

DATE: 11 March 2022, Amended 9 May 2022

The proposal is therefore unsupported.

Note: Should you have any concerns with the referral comments above, please discuss these with the Responsible Officer.

Recommended Heritage Advisor Conditions:

Nil.