Remarks on the Dedication of a Plaque Commemorating Professor Leslie Wilkinson OBE, at Greenway, 24 Wentworth Road, Vaucleuse, April 29, 2024

Thank you, Cr Jarvis, for that warm introduction. I share your gratitude that we can all gather here at Greenway to recognise the impressive and lasting contribution made by Professor Leslie Wilkinson to this city, to Australian architecture and the Australian profession, and to the university that persuaded him to share in—and indeed lead—its ambitions to advance the architecture of this country.

As has been said already, when Leslie Wilkinson arrived in Sydney in 1918 to take up the Chair of Architecture at the age of 35, he was the first person to hold such a position at an Australian institution—and one of very few to hold such a chair in the British Empire. The search for the University's first Chair of Architecture had, in one sense, been underway since 1916, when it was advertised, and its committee formed, but in another it had been a project of nearly three decades—ever since the PN Russell Lectureship in Architecture had established at the start of the 1880s the promise of a professional architecture school within the confines of the University of Sydney.

Wilkinson succeeded in a field of names that has been lost to time. His appointment was announced in newspapers around Australia in February 1918; he arrived in the middle of August, later that year, four months before the end of the war. He had been allowed to resign his commission to do so. The day after his arrival, the *Herald* (August 20, 1918) named his welcoming committee from the Institute of Architects, which included John F. Henessey and Jack Henessy (father and son—Henessey and Henessey, as it were), Harry Kent, Arthur Anderson, George Jones, and the Woollahra-born Robert Pickering—later meeting University Registrar Henry Barff "and several of the University Professors." John Sulman wasted no time in introducing him to the town planning fraternity a week later, hosting a meeting in which before colleagues and politicians he made the connection between Wilkinson's appointment and the possibility of a new chapter in the history of Australia's cities. These engagements were all widely reported across the city's newspapers.

If this seems like a lot of attention for a new university professor, it is because their world is not ours. A new Chair of Architecture at that moment completed the formula allowing the long anticipated maturity of the architectural profession: the New South Wales Institute of Architects working in cooperation with the University; a Chair of Architecture in balance with the Government Architect as their two professional figureheads; education and registration ensuring the quality of the work by those called architects—the Architect's Act would be passed only in 1921, effectively completing this collective (indeed, national) ambition that resonated throughout the British world. With a Chair, the University could establish a Department of Architecture, and rather than merely supplement the technical courses and on-the-job training by which architects had hitherto been formed, could offer a full curriculum, meeting students' every need in one setting. It was after more than two decades and another war that Australia saw a second Chair of Architecture appointed.

Leslie Wilkinson was an accomplished architect, recognised from early on for the quality of his drawings and his command of the tenets of architectural design. Trained in the British traditions of aesthetics and architectural technique, he realised a number of works throughout England. After his studies at the Royal Academy, he travelled throughout Europe before joining the distinguished architect and professor FM Simpson at the University College London—himself one of a very small number of British architecture chairs. Wilkinson taught, and he built, assisting Simpson on the new premises of the Bartlett School—Britain's first purpose-built architecture school premises. When he applied for the post in Sydney, he gave no fewer than eleven names in reference, three of whom on the search committee itself. One of them wrote: "He would vitalise the study of Architecture and impress Students with the fact that it is a living art."

Wilkinson's intention to bridge the teaching and practice of architecture within the ambit of his appointment was thinly described in a discreet enquiry from within the London-based panel selected to fill the Chair of Architecture, wondering if the successful candidate might be able to take up private commissions for buildings on campus, or elsewhere—alongside their other duties to the university. The senate said no, or rather, not really, but shortly into his tenure, Wilkinson had not only promoted his department to the status of a faculty, but had succeeded where Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahoney Griffin had failed, and successfully tabled a masterplan of the University of Sydney campus.

His contribution of such fine works to that plan as the Physics and Badham buildings—many new structures and additions, both grand and modest, were absorbed into an idea of the campus as a site of experimentation.

In his inaugural lecture, Wilkinson made clear that he thought the education of the architect was a holistic affair: one needed to know the art of construction and composition; to appreciate the effects on a commission of climate, as well as of history. His drawings are astounding, and he taught students to think with their hands—not only to invent, but to process the many conditions that come to bear upon a site and its structures. As he stated: “We must build up the deficiency and aim at turning out students thoroughly equipped in all respects, possessed of fine taste, good sense, broad sympathies, full of imagination and ideas, supported by the practical common sense of the skilled constructor, organiser, and supervisor.”

As he taught students, so did he act. In his own houses and institutional buildings, of which there are many, he sought the proper expression of Sydney’s place in the world, and in time. On Wilkinson’s appointment as Chair of Architecture, the Institute of Architects’ president, Arthur Pritchard, predicted that moment would turn Sydney into “the Art centre and Paris of the southern hemisphere … [and make its architecture] the most glorious and imperishable record of a Nation’s greatness.” I think Wilkinson’s ambitions, and achievements, are much more subtle than these lines suggest—drawing out the potential of our own history and traditions, materials, climate, and topography. He searched for this city’s familiars and the clues they contained for how we ought to build. His recognition, here, of climatic conditions akin to those of the Mediterranean basin he had encountered in his travels suggested certain solutions—the arrangement of rooms, inside and out; decoration; and finish. But this went beyond pragmatic lessons to cultural aspirations. There was no reason, he asserted, that architects trained and practising in Sydney should be hampered by distance in their production of fine architecture.

While the graduates of Wilkinson’s era of Sydney-trained architects went on to build all manner of things, in all manner of ways—some defending the beaux-arts roots that underpinned Wilkinson’s educational reforms; others reaching for the modernism that took hold in the 1930s and 40s—the house remained a setting in which all these lessons came together. It was in the house that architectural and cultural issues met; and it was there, too, that the family as society’s building block would be most directly addressed. In this respect, Wilkinson’s building for his own family modelled the aspirations he cultivated among his students.

In his academic and professional life, he set an example that his students took seriously. When his former student Peter Johnson in the late 1960s took up the chair and deanship Wilkinson had inaugurated, it was in this same mode: engaged with the institutions of the city, and the nation; a devoted teacher, who could turn to his own work to explain principles and solutions; and this because he was a fine architect, recognised as such within his own profession. It is fitting that the Faculty of Architecture building on City Road, first designed by Arthur Baldwinson and elaborated by Johnson, bears Wilkinson’s name—indeed, his portrait welcomes all visitors to that building. It is also fitting, given his legacy of such houses as Greenway, that the Institute of Architect’s highest honour for residential building in New South Wales is named the Leslie Wilkinson Award—and that one adorns Johnson’s own house.

That we are recognising Professor Leslie Wilkinson with a plaque outside Greenway could not be more appropriate. The construction of this house was underway shortly after Wilkinson’s arrival in Sydney, and was, famously, named for the convict architect who worked hand-in-glove with Governor Lachlan Macquarie to realise a generation’s worth of monumental buildings in the colony, thereby establishing a tradition of architects working within government for the public good. Wilkinson’s own experiments with Georgian style are an extension of this tribute.

But if Francis Greenway represented an origin, of sorts, for architecture in New South Wales, Wilkinson suggests another—the elevation of the profession by institutional means, now alongside the Government Architect, within the University. He personified a claim staked on an idea of university architectural education, but also of the professor of architecture as a cultural figure, responsible for raising the aspirations of their city, and country—shaping generations, and modelling, as here, at Greenway, what our best efforts might achieve.

Prof. Andrew Leach