

THE
BATHERS'
PAVILION



Balmoral's development was slow compared to the rest of Sydney due to its lack of viable transport. In the late 1800, Balmoral was a well-known artist's camp, sharing space with Aboriginal and Chinese bush camps and a few private lots, but eventually the tram and buses reached the suburb and transformed the place.

Balmoral's natural assets—the surf-less beaches of Hunters Bay, the soft sand dunes and the enchanted setting facing the Heads—attracted crowds of picnickers and bathers, especially in the summer months. More public space was needed for the gentlemen and ladies of the era to indulge in their recreation and so 'Balmoral Park' was created in 1886, followed by repossession of private land by the Council along the bay. The Council erected bathing facilities due to the ever-growing influx of visitors to the beach and the resort atmosphere of Balmoral.

By 1924 trams, motorbuses and ferry services from Circular Quay fully serviced the beach and the suburb. The Balmoral tramline was opened in May 1922, making its way from Spit Junction to Middle Head Road and down to Balmoral Beach, ending at Lawry Parade. The tram terminus was near the present bus stop at the south end of the Island off Rocky Point. Even before The Bathers' Pavilion opened, it was calculated that the beach crowd could reach over thirty thousand people in summer, many tens of thousands more than there are these days. There was a boat rental business, Treimuth's dressing sheds, the Beach Club, the ferry wharf, Shearer's baths, the boat shed, a dance Hall called Happyland and other business.

The bathing phenomenon took hold of Sydney, putting continued pressure on its accessible beaches. On seeing the proliferation of swimming clubs, sheds and bathing activities Mosman Council had to react to this demand and did so by commissioning a state-of-the-art bathing pavilion. The main pressure for this development was the moral obligation to provide adequate facilities. Social mores of the day were quite strict and conservative and the building of a pavilion 'decriminalised' the activity of mixed sex bathing.

In 1924 the Esplanade replaced Lawry Parade, and in the process many majestic trees were cut down. An English-style promenade was quickly built, as well as a band rotunda, which was helped by funds earmarked to alleviate the unemployment created by the great Depression. The laying of concrete was another controversial decision, as it replaced the great sand dunes of the beach and the cutting of many more trees. It was the start of a ground swell of opposition to the perception of a council that was intent on concreting the beaches over; the public campaign of opposition to this development meant that many councillors did not survive at their next election.

At the same time, The Bathers' Pavilion was commissioned to be built by Mosman Council. The council's architect and building surveyor, Alfred Hale, designed the building, and Alderman Harry Carter laid the foundation stone on 21 August 1928. The design was certainly more seductive in its external shell, with its distinct and intriguing Moorish feel and intricate features such as the many delicate fretwork windows, which had to provide privacy and a great amount of ventilation. Alfred Hale's design made for a stunning and imposing visual adornment to the beach with what was essentially a large changing shed. The Pavilion was officially opened on February 20 1929.

The Bathers' Pavilion was set over two stories, catering for men, women and for boys. It had living quarters for the caretaker, and an ambulance and attendant's room. The north side of the building was used for the women and the south side for the men. From day one the building was leased to a private operator, as resolved by Mosman Council. Woollen bathing costumes, caps, towels and trunks were made available for a fee, as well as lockers, change room cubicles where one could disrobe in privacy. The building was advertised as possessing the latest sanitary conveniences. The boys' area was later subleased and used for the sale of refreshments, causing a big controversy at the time.

More controversial was the building of the shark barrier. There were plenty of blue pointers and bronze whalers cruising the deep channel up to the spit and a shark attack could potentially have a devastating effect on the well-established business of the beach. Council's original proposal was to build a Blackpool style pier extending right across Edwards Beach from Rocky Point Island to the Wy-argine rocks, where a four-story edifice was to be built, dwarfing the Bathers' Pavilion. It was rejected mostly over the issue of giving a private body power over access to the beach. The next proposal was to build a wooden shark-proof barrier along the full length of Edwards Beach. This proposal was also rejected because the proposal included fencing off the beach and charging an entrance fee.

It was not until 1935, following a spate of dramatic and fatal shark attacks on Sydney beaches that the present shark net was built. It was one quarter of the original proposed size and many swimmers opted not to use it, but the Council could no longer ignore the menace of shark attack. The last fatal attack was in clear view of The Bathers' Pavilion in January 1955, when a young thirteen-year-old boy was seen entering the water with some meat to bait his lobster pot. Despite the warning from another swimmer that a large shark was seeing prowling the area over the last few days, John Willis was fatally attacked. With the netting of the beaches outside the Sydney heads shark attacks and sightings eventually diminished and became a rarity.

The use of The Bathers' Pavilion was pretty much as intended until 1967, when there was 'a sharp decline in the use made by the public' of the building changing facilities. Mr Kanaef won the tender and established the well-known Misha's Restaurant, a place that is still fondly remembered by many. Misha, as he was called, traded for quite a colourful period of time without realising his dream of a second-floor restaurant, but he made brunch an institution at Balmol

Not long after Yvette and I moved into our great little apartment, I could not help but notice the controversy that raged over the renovation of the pavilion. The lease of The Bathers' Pavilion had been purchased by Andrew Joseph and his wife Victoria Alexander, their intention being to create a small hotel, make use of the whole dilapidated building and provide the funds for the Council to renew the fabric of the building. The building did look in dire need of renovation and the council proposal seemed to be a perfect use of an historic building, so I found it hard to understand the opposition. Sure it probably made sense to reserve part of the building for the community's use, but what type of use: teaching crafts, group meetings, lectures, or some other limited use? The council had plenty of unused rooms and spaces in their community centre and could not justify this prime location to do what could easily be done at other buildings.

Fear was another major factor that contributed to the public's objection to the project. Was it going to be a large bar with drunken people spilling out late at night? Was it going to be a hotel with all the seedy activities that could go on behind doors, or was it going to be an elitist place for the few well-healed? Add to that the fear that it would attract more people to Balmoral Beach with its limited parking facilities and the mix was a potent one for misinformation and uninformed judgment. The debate became very public, protracted, costly and divisive, which is quite common when a very much loved, historical and public building is at stake.

The process of resolution took years through an interminable succession of council meetings, legal challenges and negotiations over many years. The fact that it was going to be a commercial development (thereby allowing the council to renovate the derelict building) was probably never in question. The real issue was just what type of business was going to occupy the space and if any of the space was to be allocated for public use. All of these issues got resolved in the late 90s when the last legal challenge was finally exhausted, allowing the work to proceed.

Victoria's dream was to design and develop a small hotel. Her vision would have preserved the fabric of a great building that had a strong but lost link to the area and make use of the

entire floor space for activities that seemed compatible with the site. It would also provide a regular income for the council, and anchor the building in renewed and replanted parkland. Her tenacity became legendary, even if with reluctance the hotel portion of her dream had to eventually be given away to be replaced by a larger restaurant.

I received Victoria's call to ask me to be part of the redevelopment of the Bathers' while I was travelling in France. I knew the building well and had an admiration for her commitment to preserve it. I also admired her sense of style and the way she had created such a beautiful and cosy place. It was a restaurant with a great view, good food and many touches that defined her space. It had a distinct style that people loved: the view, the food, the wine, and the casual but informed service, it all made for a restaurant that was quintessential Sydney.

On my return from my trip I agreed to form an equal partnership with Victoria to design, build and operate the new Pavilion and become the new lessees of this iconic building. Her role was to style the place and my role was to cook and run the operation. It was a dream come true, even though we eventually parted ways. I was living a few minutes on foot from the site on the same street, and I was ready to take on a new challenge after working at The Regent Sydney for so many years. I finally had the chance to design my own kitchens, develop menus, select table settings, hire my own staff and to create great food directly in front of one of Sydney's best beaches. It was going to be a magnificently rewarding project.

Before the renovation could start to provide a functional space for a restaurant, a lot of the fabric had to be preserved, renovated and readapted. Robert A. Moore was the heritage consultant who understood the history of the building, but also knew the need to have a person of great sensitivity to produce an integral design that would satisfy many competing objectives. The design had to be functional but more importantly it had to respect the integrity and the history of the building.

Alex Popov was appointed as architect in charge of producing the design. He had a reputation for his stylish and intelligent home design, incorporating and blending in a zen-like fashion the concepts of light, space and shelter. Alex created an intelligent design of great simplicity and I found my time working with Alex to be joyful and inspiring. His design legacy has fulfilled so thoughtfully our need for striking spatial space, heritage respect, practicality and a sense of space.

Once the spatial arrangements were firmed then the hard work of defining the interior started. John Rayner and Grant McConnell from McConnell Rayner were the last link in the production of our dream restaurant. In June 1999 The Bathers' Pavilion finally reopened, providing joy and pleasure to the many that were to patronise this great building and unique restaurant.

People love driving over the top of Balmoral Hill as the curve of Hunters Bay reveals itself with the glittering sea, national parks and Sydney heads in the distance. By the time you reach the bottom of the hill the historic Bathers' Pavillion and its promenade give the feel of a different era. Set in the picturesque harbour shores and framed by its parkland and the stunning Port Jackson and Moreton Bay fig trees, it is a unique vista.

Once you enter The Bathers' Pavilion, the first thing you notice is the beach view, which offers an overwhelming background to the clean line of the restaurant and café. The proximity of the beach is a constant reminder of the link between a beach pavilion and the reinvented Bathers'. While the historic building has now clearly outlived its original purpose, a new life has been breathed into its fabric. It is such a unique experience to sit in the café or restaurant and absorb the view and the activities of the beach and the bay, with its ever-present beachgoers and boats sailing in the distance. And more than once we have been graced with the presence of whales and dolphin in full view of Bathers'.

The Café has been such a success because I think the public love the food on offer and the casual but efficient service we provide. Yes, the views are gorgeous, but bad food would prevent them from returning. My role is to bring joy to all my customer, to make Sydneysiders proud of what we have to offer and to create a work place that reflect the best Australia can offer in term of food, wine and service.

Serge Dansereau