

WALTER HAYWARD MORRIS (1899-1990)

Walter Morris inherited artistic talents from craftsmen in the families of both his parents. He was an only child and had an exciting childhood. In 1908 the family moved briefly to Utah, but his engineering patternmaker father chose to return them to England. They then set off for Sydney and settled there in 1909. In order to study architecture, Walter enrolled in preparatory subjects at Sydney Technical College in 1915 and began working in architects' offices. In 1921 he achieved top marks in the Diploma of Architecture course he had begun in 1919 and was awarded the Kemp Memorial Medal. Having completed the course in 1922, he was awarded a NSW Board of Architects Travelling Scholarship and Australian Medallion in 1924. Members of the Board included Professor Leslie Wilkinson and George Godsell. Walter departed for England and a study tour of France, Belgium, Spain, Italy and Switzerland. While working in England for over a year in several architects' offices, his abilities were favourably commented on by prominent architects, such as Sir Edwin Lutyens. After a brief tour of America, Morris returned to Sydney with copious drawings, writings and photographs in late 1926. Nothing has survived, but he wrote an illustrated report, published in the journal *Architecture* in 1930. Its subject is mainly town planning, particularly of city squares.

Morris began working in 1927 for George Godsell at the Sydney architectural firm Robertson and Marks. Fortuitously, the Federal Capital Commission in Canberra, planning that year to reorganise its Architects' Department, was seeking an architect with outstanding design talents. FCC Chairman Sir John Butters and architects on the FCC Committee of Public Taste wanted a fresh approach to the design of major public buildings in Canberra. The committee's chairman, George Godsell and others on the committee, including Professor Wilkinson, chose Walter, who they described as "a brilliant young architect," for the position of Principal Assistant Designing Architect at the FCC. Walter accepted it and moved to Canberra in November 1927. His most urgent task was to design what became the Australian Institute of Anatomy and to do so he travelled to Melbourne and conferred with its progenitor and director, Professor Colin MacKenzie. His collection of Australian flora and fauna, and Aboriginal relics, gifted to the nation in 1922, was to be displayed in an anatomical and ethnological museum. Inspired by Butters' call for "an architectural gem", Morris produced an innovative Stripped Classical style U-shaped stone-clad two-storey building, completed in 1930. The Art Deco decorative elements drew on Australian animals, flora and Aboriginal art to an extent unequalled elsewhere. He also designed a residence for the Director nearby, with Art Deco geometric details.

Another project, undertaken by Morris in 1928, was to provide buildings for the Divisions of Economic Entomology and Economic Botany of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. He designed a building with two-storey wings and a three-storey administration block, in the Stripped Classical style. Its plainness reflects the deteriorating economic climate at the time, but Art Deco details included decorative plaques appropriate to the research subjects. The wings were completed in 1930 but the administrative block was deferred until 1956, and is an amended design. Morris also designed housing for the FCC, in particular Inter-War Mediterranean style semi-detached two-storey dwellings, some in Reid, and a major group, of 32 duplexes and four corner buildings (1930-34) containing the city's first flats, at Manuka shopping centre. The way they are laid out symmetrically along the crescents reflects Walter's interest in town planning.

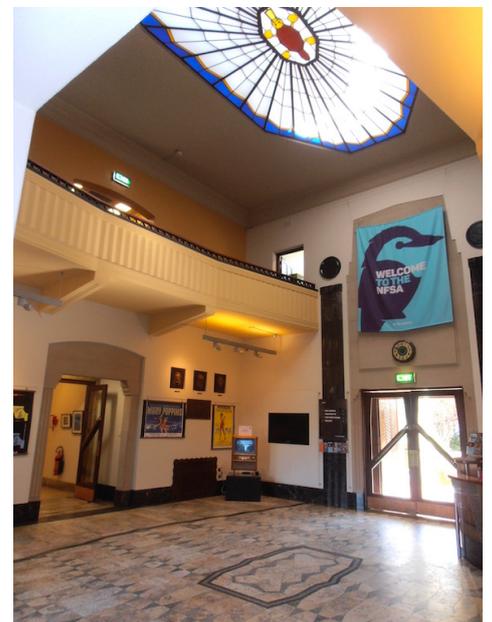
Walter had married Doris Woodhead in September 1929. They lived in Canberra, but when she was pregnant and required medical attention, they moved to Sydney in June 1930. Walter joined the practice of Emil Sodersteen and enrolled in the Town Planning course at the University of Sydney in 1936. He left the practice during World War 2, and aided the war effort by working for the Allied Works Council under its Director of Architecture, H.M. Rolland, who had a long association with Canberra. After the war, Walter became an associate of Peddle, Thorp and Walker, a major Sydney architectural practice, where he remained of the rest of his working life. He designed such undistinguished buildings as a factory for Dairy Farmers at Lidcombe. He received his Diploma of Town and Country Planning in 1949, was elected a Fellow of the RAI A in 1954 and retired in the 1970s. Walter died in 1991, soon after his wife Doris. A talented designer not given to self-promotion, he is remembered only for a few buildings in Canberra during his sojourn there for less than three years, which coincided with the great period of development under the FCC.

References:

Source of photo of W.H. Morris: Margaret A. Morris.

Brendan O’Keefe, *Walter Hayward Morris*, Canberra Historical Journal No 76, March 2016.

Tim Reeves and Alan Roberts, ‘Manuka Housing Precinct’ in *100 Canberra Houses*, Halstead Press, 2013, p50.



Top: Former Australian Institute of Anatomy (1930), now the National Film and Sound Archive and the interior of its foyer.
Right: Manuka Housing Precinct (1930-34).
Photos by Ken Charlton