

# Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

**RSTCA No:** R100

**Name of Place:** House at 24 Arthur Circle Forrest

**Other/Former Names:**

**Address/Location:** 24 Arthur Circle FORREST 2603

Block 14 Section 44 of South Canberra

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	1996	Level of Significance:	
Citation Revision No:		Category:	Residential
Citation Revision Date:	2004	Style:	Inter-War Functionalist

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Date of Design:	1939	Designer:	Kenneth Oliphant
Construction Period:	1940	Client/Owner/Lessee:	
Date of Additions:		Builder:	

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## Statement of Significance

The residence at 24 Arthur Circle, Forrest, is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. The original house was built when the Inter-War Functionalist style (1915-1940) was relatively new in Australia. The design incorporates many of the features that are specific to the style with its asymmetrical massing, simple geometric shapes and roof concealed by parapet.

The following design features of the original house are of additional significance: the cantilevered hood, semi-circular wing, rounded corner, the brick fireplace in the living room, the curved entry porch and stairs, the entry brickwork detailing, the simple brick cornice and the fenestration.

The architecture of this building may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of inter-war architectural styles.

The residence is important for its association with the talented Canberra architect Kenneth Oliphant; it is one of two surviving examples of his work still exhibiting the features specific to the style, the other is at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939, and it is notable for displaying the design skill of Oliphant. Oliphant played a significant role in Canberra's cultural history. He was one of Canberra's first independent practicing architects, and may have been the first establishing his own practice in Canberra in 1927, retiring in 1960. Between 1927 and 1953 he undertook literally hundreds of private commissions including houses in the inner south of Canberra and in the village of Hall; commercial developments in Civic, Braddon, Manuka and Kingston; farm buildings; church halls; industrial and institutional buildings.

Of all his architecture the most significant is the architecture he designed just before WWII. With the passage of time many of these buildings have been demolished or extensively altered beyond recognition of their original aesthetic, however, a few remain including the original section of the Canberra Milk Building, Griffith, 1937, and the house at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939. This gives greater significance to the residence at 24 Arthur Circle, Forrest.

The architecture of this residence may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Inter-War Functionalist styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories.

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## Description

The original three-bedroom residence was designed by Kenneth Oliphant for Mr & Mrs J A Lea in 1940 and construction was completed in 1940<sup>1</sup>. The building is a late example of the Inter-War Functionalist Style (1915-40) with its asymmetrical massing, simple geometric shapes and roof concealed by parapet. The residence was extended to the rear in 1996 and the exterior rendered and painted.

The original residence was a single storey near rectangular plan with two circular 'bay windows', one off the living room and one at the corner of the main bedroom. The 1996 rear extension, while quite large, has been designed to limit the impact on the original place. The new work extends the house in an "H" plan where a new family room connects to the centre of the rear of the original residence. The tie through from the original to the new extension replaces the original laundry. Three new bedrooms, wet areas and a store extend along the western wing off the new family room completing the "H" plan.

The original recessed entry to the residence is still intact and is approached around a circular front porch that is centred on the living room curved facade. The entry is given prominence by the stepped shafted brick corner treatment on the right side wall. The front door opens into a lobby with the living room to the left and a perpendicular passageway at its end that leads to the other rooms in the original part of the residence. The main changes to the front original section include the following:

- The wall and double doors between the living room and dining room have been removed;
- The kitchen has been renovated and the door closed off and a new opening provided to the northwest corner;
- The bathroom has been renovated and now forms the ensuite to the main bedroom;
- The main bedroom has been enlarged by removing the wall between it and the third bedroom;
- The 2<sup>nd</sup> bedroom has been altered to a study with the door relocated from the passage to the entry lobby, and
- The fenestration has been altered to a small extent.

### **The following description sets out the plan and fabric of the original residence.**

The living room has an open fireplace located centrally in the south wall. It is constructed of small narrow bricks in the Art Deco Style. To the left the 'bay window' opens out to the east onto the front curved porch. The bay is formed by faceted glazing, consisting of two glass doors and two large sidelight double casement windows set under a curved flat concrete hooded roof. On the opposite side of the room, double doors open into the dining room to the west.

The dining room has a fire place central to the south wall and a central window in the west wall overlooking the rear garden.

The main bedroom is located at the northeast end of the residence. It has a semi-circular corner window with a radius of 1.5m located under a curved flat concrete roof. Its form protrudes from the corner of the room with built-in window seats and under seat storage below the sill internally and curved brickwork externally.

The kitchen projects partially out to the west with a rear porch to its north. A separate flat metal roof extends over the projecting section of the kitchen.

The remainder of the residence has simple planning with the laundry and bathroom next to the kitchen on the west side. The other two bedrooms are next to the main bedroom, one to the northwest and the other facing the street next to the entry. This front bedroom shares three symmetrical double-hung windows to the front façade with the main bedroom, two to the front bedroom and one to the main bedroom.

The external form was dominated by the asymmetrical massing of simple geometric shapes constructed from light-toned face brickwork recalling the work of the Dutch architect, Willem Dudok. Dudok's most influential work was the Town Hall, Hilversum, Holland, in 1930 with its strong horizontal and vertical brick forms and simple cornices.

These elements can be seen in this residence with the play of the two south side chimney forms against the stepped horizontal rectangular mass of the house.

The elegant curved forms along the front of the house contrast with the cubic massing of the rest of the house. The corner half circle in the corner of the main bedroom is a remarkable play of volumes where the curve is not the full height of the building but is a half cylinder placed into the cubic form and allowed to protrude from the facade. This creates an element that has some technical complexity with the cantilevering concrete beams and has more in common with the constructivist forms than simple Art Deco where the full height of the wall would turn the corner.

The house is constructed of face cavity brickwork with a low pitched metal roof supported by timber framing. Reinforced concrete beams support the concrete hoods over the bay windows while a central steel post in the window frame to the main bedroom adds additional support to the hood.

Prior to 1996 the house was unaltered. The two main changes to the front of the original residence that affect its original design intent and fabric are the render and painted finish to the face brickwork and the addition of the raised front curved path and support wall across the front of the house and around the lower half of the main bedroom bay window. The drawings approved by the planning authority did not show the façade was to be rendered and painted. The path and support wall detract from the original design preventing the reading of the cubic form and the curved form meeting the ground plane.

Other architectural elements of the Inter-War Functionalist style (1915-40) displayed by the building that relate to the external forms are:

- cantilevered hood
- semi-circular wing
- rounded corner

There are architectural elements that are important to the integrity of the building which are not necessarily common features of the Inter-War Functionalist Style: internally, the brick fireplace in the living room and the main bedroom's built in seating and storage (now demolished); externally, the curved front porch and stairs, the entry brickwork detailing, the simple brick cornice and the fenestration.

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### **Condition and Integrity**

The house has been extended and the exterior rendered and painted.

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### **Background/History**

This 1940 modern brick architecture was a new achievement at the time in Australia. The residence was one of the first truly modern designs in Canberra expressing the three dimensional cubic massing of the Inter-War Functionalist Style.

This modern brick architecture may have been influenced by Australian architecture of the time or published work from Europe. In Australia this may have included work in Victoria by Geoffrey Mewton and Roy Grounds Architects in projects such as the Critchley Parker House, Upper Beaconsfield, 1933, published in the "Australian Home Beautiful" and the George Stooke House, Brighton, 1934 6.

It is likely that these influences may also have come from either Europe directly or from the English interpretation of them. The modern movement was beginning to have some affect on English architecture in the early 1930s. In Europe, influences may have been the architecture of WM Dudok in Holland and Mies van der Rohe in Germany. It may also have been influenced by Australian architecture including the Automotive Engineering Building, Sydney Technical College and the Mechanical Engineering Building Newcastle Technical College, both designed by the NSW Government Architect in 1938. 6.

The introduction of modern (functionalist) architecture from Europe came relatively late to Australia.

While it began in the 1920s in Europe it was not introduced into Australia until the mid 1930s. The period between 1915-1940 is a convenience of chronology, which could lead to a misunderstanding of the significance of a building designed in this style in 1940. The authors of "Identifying Australian Architecture" used the start of WWI to the start of WWII as an easily recognised period in history to describe this period, not because this style of architecture began in Australia in 1915.

There are other examples of the Inter-War Functionalist Style in Canberra including Malcolm Moir's own house at 43 Melbourne Avenue, Forrest, 1937, by Moir, the Evans Crescent Precinct, Griffith, 1938-40, by Moir & Sutherland, the original section of the Canberra Milk Building, Griffith, designed by Ken Oliphant in about 1938, the former Forrest Fire Station Precinct, Forrest, 1938, by E H Henderson, the house at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939, by Oliphant (now extended), the Government single storey detached houses designed by Cuthbert Whitley in Kingston and Bradden, **1940-41** and the Kingston Bus Depot Office 1940.

Oliphant was commissioned by Mr & Mrs Lea to design the three-bedroom house, the only stipulation being that the living room and main bedroom were to have bay windows. The form and style was the architect's own choice without influence from the client<sup>11</sup>.

Kenneth Oliphant (1894-1975) was one of Canberra's first independent practicing architects, and may have been the first. He was posted to Canberra in 1926 from Melbourne as the supervising architect for the Blandfordia 4 Housing project, now Forrest Conservation Area, which the Melbourne firm of Oakley & Parkes had won in a 1924 competition. Oliphant remained in Canberra and established his own practice in 1927, retiring in 1960. Between 1927 and 1953 he undertook literally hundreds of private commissions including houses in the inner south of Canberra and in the village of Hall; commercial developments in Civic, Bradden, Manuka and Kingston; farm buildings; church halls; industrial and institutional buildings.

Of all his architecture the most significant is the architecture he designed just before the WWII including the original section of the Canberra Milk Building, Griffith, 1937, and the house at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939. His other functionalist designs of this period have either been demolished or extensively altered beyond recognition of their original aesthetic, an example being the house at 13 Evans Crescent which has a Cape Cod upper level addition.

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### **Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991**

*(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time*

The creativity of the architect Kenneth Oliphant is apparent in the design of the original house, which was innovative when compared with other housing built in Canberra at that time.

The design of the house in 1940 in the Inter-War Functionalist Style (1915-1940) represented a new architectural style in Australia at the time. The earliest notable Australian examples built in the style date from the mid 1930's including Critchley Parker House, Upper Beaconsfield, 1933 and the George Stooke House, Brighton, 1934 both by G Mewton and R Grounds Architects, the Sanitarium Health Food Factory, Warburton Victoria, 1937, by E Billson and the Automotive Engineering Building, Sydney Technical College, Ultimo, NSW, 1938, by E Rembert.

The earliest notable Canberra examples built in the Inter-War Functionalist Style in Canberra including Malcolm Moir's own house at 43 Melbourne Avenue, Forrest, 1937, by Moir, the Evans Crescent Precinct, Griffith, 1938-40, by Moir & Sutherland, the original section of the Canberra Milk Building, Griffith, designed by Ken Oliphant in about 1938, the former Forrest Fire Station Precinct, Forrest, 1938, by E H Henderson, the house at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939, by Oliphant (now extended), the Government single storey detached houses designed by Cuthbert Whitley in Kingston and Braddon, **1940-41**, and the Kingston Bus Depot Offices 1940.

The residence is one of only two known to still exist in a recognizable form, the other being at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin.

The semi circular corner glazing and structure to the main bedroom is a notable play of volumes where the curve is not the full height of the building but is a half cylinder placed into the cubic form

and allowed to protrude from the facade. This creates an element that is technically complex which has been resolved with a degree of structural skill, unusual in domestic work, creating innovative architectural forms.

*(ii) a place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group*

The residence is a significant example of the Inter-War Functionalist style of architecture and is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Kenneth Oliphant.

The residence exhibits many of the particular elements peculiar to the Inter-War Functionalist Style (1915-40) including asymmetrical massing, simple geometric shapes and roof concealed by parapet.

The following design features are of additional significance: the cantilevered hoods, semi-circular wing, rounded corner, corner window, curved front porch and stairs, entry brickwork detailing, simple brick cornice, sizing and location of the glazing and the brick fireplace in the living room.

The building is valued by the RAI as a very good example of this style of architecture and it makes a valuable contribution to the small number of surviving Inter-War Functionalist buildings in Canberra. It compares favourably with the architecture of Moir and Sutherland and the government architecture of Cuthbert Whitley.

*(iii) a place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger or being lost, or is of exceptional interest*

The design of the house demonstrates an important development in architectural style between the Depression and the WWII, by contrast with traditional architectural styles. Relatively few houses were built in this style in Canberra, and only a small number of these still exist in a recognizable form. Modern architecture, both the functionalist and international periods, was the most important architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Canberra is one of the few 20<sup>th</sup> Century designed cities in the world. The combination of modern architecture and urban design is of exceptional interest.

Criterion (vii): A place which has a strong or special association with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history.

The residence is important for its association with Kenneth Oliphant who played a significant role in Canberra's cultural history. Oliphant was one of Canberra's first independent practicing architects, and may have been the first. He was posted to Canberra in 1926 from Melbourne as the supervising architect for the Blandfordia 4 Housing project, now Forrest Conservation Area, which the Melbourne firm of Oakley & Parkes had won in a 1924 competition. Oliphant remained in Canberra and established his own practice in 1927, retiring in 1960. Between 1927 and 1953 he undertook literally hundreds of private commissions including houses in the inner south of Canberra and in the village of Hall; commercial developments in Civic, Braddon, Manuka and Kingston; farm buildings; church halls; industrial and institutional buildings.

Of all his buildings, the most significant are those designed just before WWII including the original section of the Canberra Milk Building, Griffith, 1937, and the house at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939. His other functionalist designs of this period have either been demolished or extensively altered beyond recognition of their original aesthetic.

The residence is of significance to the suburb of Forrest and Manuka area, specifically in its architectural expression.

*(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site*

Through its architectural style and planning this building is a valuable educational resource for designers and planners. Its architecture is characteristic of the Inter-War Functionalist style.

The architecture of this residence may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural Styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories. This building is a very good example of the style. Its innovative planning contributes to its significance and educational heritage. .

The modern aesthetic of the residence can be contrasted with much of the more conservative residential architecture of the time.

The residence can be compared with Malcolm Moir's own house at 43 Melbourne Avenue, Forrest, 1937, by Moir, the Evans Crescent Precinct, Griffith, 1938-40, by Moir & Sutherland, the original section of the Canberra Milk Building, Griffith, designed by Ken Oliphant in about 1938, the former Forrest Fire Station Precinct, Forrest, 1938, by E H Henderson, the house at 4 Hotham Crescent, Deakin, 1939, by Oliphant (now extended), the Government single storey detached houses designed by Cuthbert Whitley in Kingston and Braddon, **1940-41**, and the Kingston Bus Depot Offices 1940.

Given that Canberra is one of the world's significant 20<sup>th</sup> century designed cities, its built form, and the timing of local events (in juxtaposition with world events and stylistic movements) is likely to be of increasing research benefit over time.

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## References

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## Other Information Sources

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>i</sup> Department of the Environment, Land and Planning (DELPL) Building File for Block 14 Section 44 Forrest.

<sup>ii</sup> Conversation with Mrs Lea, original owner of the house until 1995.