

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R117

Name of Place: Pair of Functionalist Style Houses

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 95 & 97 Canberra Avenue GRIFFITH ACT 2603

Blocks 11 & 12 Section 23 of Griffith

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	2003	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation Revision No:	1	Category:	Residential
Citation Revision Date:	October 2000	Style:	Inter-War Functionalist

Date of Design:	Type 11 - 16.6.1939 Type 108 - 29.8.1939	Designer:	C Whitley
Construction Period:	September 1939 -	Client/Owner/Lessee:	Unknown
Date of Additions:	None	Builder:	Unknown

Statement of Significance

These houses are significant examples of the Inter-War Functionalist Style of architecture and are notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Cuthbert Whitley. Most of the indicators peculiar to the Inter-War Functionalist style are exhibited here. They are asymmetrical massing, simple geometric shapes, metal-framed windows and a roof concealed by parapets. The houses are valued by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects as good examples of their style.

The designs of the houses reflect an important aspect of the taste of the period from the onset of the Depression leading up to the Second World War, by demonstrating the way traditional architectural styles were being eschewed in favour of modernism. This is the only surviving example of an adjacent pair of Department of the Interior single-storied Functionalist style houses. The Type 111 house is the only survivor of its type. The Type 108 house is one of only two surviving examples of its type. The creativity of the architect Cuthbert Whitley is apparent in the design of the houses, which was innovative when compared with other government housing designed in Australia at the time.

Through its architectural style and urban form this pair of houses is a valuable educational resource for designers and planners, as their architecture is characteristic of the Inter-War Functionalist Style, and their planning reflects the taste of the period. The location of the pair of house on one of Canberra's main avenues reinforces its educational value.

The pair of houses is important for its strong associations with the talented architect Cuthbert Whitley, who as Senior Architect held a key position in the Department of the Interior Works Branch and designed some of Canberra's finest public buildings. The design of the house indicates his unfulfilled intentions for Canberra's government housing after 1939 to be modern. If the Second World War had not occurred and if an apparently more conservative architect had not taken over from Whitley, much of Canberra's government housing at that time may have contributed to the advancement of architecture by following the course of modernism.

Description

A Department of the Interior Type 108 house (Block 12) and a Type 111 house, (Block 11) documented in August 1939 and June 1939 respectively in the Department's Works Branch. Their designs are attributed to the Acting Chief Architect Cuthbert Whitley, who approved the working

drawings.¹ They were built soon afterwards.² Their Inter-War Functionalist style designs are related to the modern architecture of Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the Schroeder House in Utrecht (Gerrit Rietveld; 1924) which exhibited principles of the De Stijl theory.³ Characteristics of that style of architecture exhibited in these houses are asymmetrical massing of simple geometric shapes, plain surfaces, flat roofs concealed behind parapets and metal-framed windows in horizontal bands, giving a streamlined effect.⁴

The houses are single-storied, with walls of white-painted brick and parapets concealing low-pitched roofs sheeted in asbestos-cement. There are steel-framed windows, with horizontally-proportioned panes, to the living rooms of each house. Except for the steel window of the Type 108 house bathroom, all other windows are timber-framed. The front walls have long brick flower-boxes and hoods at window-head height extending over the entrances. The flower-boxes and hoods are the main horizontal elements of the south-facing front elevations.

Internally, each house has a hall opening to a living room with a large corner window and a corner fireplace. The hall in each house leads to a passage, off which is a kitchen with a dining nook. Each kitchen leads via a side porch to a laundry. Off each passage are three bedrooms and a bathroom. The Type 111 house has a separate internal toilet as well.

Condition and Integrity

The Type 108 house is remarkably intact. The Type 111 house has been neglected and is in poor condition.

Background/History

The Works Branch of the Department of the Interior was headed by Edwin Henderson from the time it was formed in 1932 from the previous Department of Works and the Federal Capital Commission, until he died in June 1939. His position was Principal Designing Architect until early 1936, when it was renamed Chief Architect. At that time there were 11 architects in the Architectural Sub-Section, all working under Cuthbert Whitley, the Senior Architect. They produced Commonwealth Banks and other government buildings throughout Australia. In Canberra the Works Branch was responsible for almost all government buildings including housing. Whitley often acted in Henderson's position, notably for some months in 1936 during which he designed the Patent Office, Canberra High School and Ainslie Primary School.⁵

Government houses in Canberra during the 1930s were generally symmetrically laid out in a uniform Mediterranean style with face brick or textured rendered-brick walls and pitched terracotta roofs and some Art Deco geometric decoration. The first radical departure from that style was a venture into the Functionalist style by Henderson, probably in consultation with Whitley, for the firemen's houses at the Forrest Fire Station in 1937. Whitley's opportunity to join the modern housing trend begun in Canberra by private sector architects Moir and Sutherland came with Henderson's death in June 1939. Whitley was in charge of the Works Branch for the next six months. On 9 August he signed a site plan of Section 23 Griffith, with single-storied houses in the Functionalist style, and more conventional residences, laid out mirror-reversed each side of two axes. A 'Residence Type 108' (two since demolished) was located on each of the four corner blocks, two of the houses being reversed for symmetry. The central three blocks on Canberra Avenue had other houses in the same style; Type 107 (since demolished) in the centre, its more cubic massing being appropriate as a centrepiece, and Type 111 and Type 111 Reversed (since demolished) on each side of it to complete the symmetry. These all had brick walls painted white and low-pitched roofs behind parapets.⁶ Apart from one Type 108 house on Block 6 Section 23, on the less prominent corner of Leichhardt Street and Burke Crescent, the two houses dealt with in this citation are the only surviving houses of their types.

War was declared on 3 September 1939 and central staff of the works branch were moved to Melbourne in November to become the executive wing of the Allied Works Council. The section which remained in Canberra was involved in projects connected with defence and a diminishing programme of government housing.⁷

Later in 1939 the Block Plan for Sections 10 & 15 Braddon was drawn up under Whitley, with

some Functionalist style houses: Types 107 and 108, facing Pialligo Street (later renamed Limestone Avenue) and, with a Type 111 as well, in Torrens Street. Before they were built, James Orwin, the former Works Director in Queensland and later New South Wales, seven years older than Whitley and apparently more conservative, was demoted to Senior Architect but took charge of the Department's Canberra Drawing Office in late December. The only Functionalist style houses built by the Department in North Canberra appear to have been two on blocks 3 and 4 in Limestone Avenue and four in Torrens Street. All had red face brickwork. They were one of Type 111, three of Type 107, of which one survives in Torrens Street, and two of Type 133 of which the house on block 4 in Limestone Avenue is the only survivor.⁸ Government housing in Canberra reverted to a less radical style after Orwin took over from Whitley. For example, the drawing of the Type 107 house was amended about May 1940 by changing the roof to hipped with terracotta tiles and changing the fenestration, which would have altered its character considerably, but none appear to have been built.⁹

The planning and design of the Functionalist houses indicate Whitley's intentions for Canberra's government housing to be modern, influenced by the houses in Evans Crescent being constructed in 1939 to designs by Moir and Sutherland and contemporary developments like Jennings' Beaumont estate in Melbourne.¹⁰

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 Cuthbert Whitley is apparent in the design of the houses, which was innovative when compared with other government housing built in Australia in the 1930s.

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

These houses are significant examples of the Inter-War Functionalist Style of architecture and are notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Cuthbert Whitley. Most of the indicators peculiar to the Inter-War Functionalist style are exhibited here. They are asymmetrical massing, simple geometric shapes, metal-framed windows and roofs concealed by parapets. The corner windows and the cantilevered hood are other significant indicators of the style. The houses are valued by the Royal Australian Institute of Architects as good examples of the Inter-War Functionalist Style of architecture. The houses compare with the architect Malcolm Moir's own house constructed in 1936 at 43 Melbourne Avenue, Forrest and the Evans Crescent Precinct, Griffith, 1938-40, by Moir and Sutherland. The similar house designed by Whitley and built in Section 10 Braddon is also comparable.

(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 houses reflects an important aspect of the taste of the period from the onset of the Depression leading up to the Second World War, by demonstrating the way traditional architectural styles were being eschewed in favour of modernism. The Functionalist style of the house was becoming increasingly popular in the late 1930s in Australia. Few houses were built in the Functionalist style in Canberra before the outbreak of the Second World War curtailed the housing programme and conservative reaction against such a radical style prevailed.

(iv) a place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations

(v) a place which is the only known or only comparatively intact example of its type

This is the only surviving example of an adjacent pair of Department of the Interior single-storied Functionalist style houses. The Type 111 house is the only survivor of its type. Apart from one house on Block 6 Section 23, on the less prominent corner of Leichhardt Street and Burke Crescent, the Type 108 house is the only surviving example of its type. The Type 108 house is remarkably intact. The Type 111 house has been neglected and is in poor condition.

(vi) a place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principal characteristics of that class

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

The pair of houses is important for its strong associations with the Department of the Interior Works Branch Senior Architect Cuthbert Whitley who designed some of Canberra's finest public buildings and, with the Chief Architect Edwin Henderson, was responsible for the design and construction of many other Commonwealth government buildings, particularly in Canberra, in the 1930s. The site planning and designs of the few Functionalist houses like these indicate Whitley's unfulfilled intentions for Canberra's government housing after 1939 to be modern. If the Second World War had not occurred and if an apparently more conservative architect had not taken over from Whitley, much of Canberra's government housing at that time may have contributed to the advancement of architecture by following the course of modernism.

(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 urban form this pair of houses is a valuable educational resource for designers and planners, as its architecture is characteristic of the Inter-War Functionalist style. The prominent location of the pair of houses on one of Canberra's main avenues reinforces its educational value.

References

1. Microfilm copies in PALM plan room of working drawings. Type 108, Reg. No. 10577, dated 29. 8. 39, & Type 111, Reg. No. 10371, dated 16. 6. 39, both signed C. Whitley, A/g Chief Architect.
2. Drainage Plans dated 13. 9. 39.
3. Patrick Nuttgens. *The Mitchell Beasley pocket guide to Architecture*, 1980, p 167.
4. Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds. *Identifying Australian Architecture - Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. Angus and Robertson, 1989, p 187.
5. Ken Charlton, *The Career of C. C. M. Whitley ARVIA, ARIBA*. Unpublished paper for the Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture Committee, RAlA (ACT) Aug 2000, p 1-3.
6. Microfilm copy in PALM plan room of 'Site Plan 15 Residences Section 23 Griffith' Reg. No. 10741 dated 9. 8. 39, signed C. Whitley, A/g Chief Architect.
7. Charlton, p 4.
8. Ibid.
9. Microfilm copy in PALM plan room of working drawing of Type 107A Registered No. 12094. Unsigned. Date estimated to be about May 1940.
10. Charlton, p 4.

Other Information Sources