

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R044

Name of Place: Beaufort House

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 25 Cowper Street Ainslie ACT 2602

Block 1 Section 23 of Ainslie

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings: Nominated to ACTHC
Date of Listing:	1984	Level of Significance: National
Citation Revision No:	2	Category: Residential
Citation Revision Date:	20 Nov 2012	Style: Post-War Melbourne Regional

Date of Design:	1945-6	Designer: Arthur Baldwinson
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Construction Period:	1947	Client/Owner/Lessee: Dept of Works and Housing
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Date of Addition:	Builder: Beaufort Division, Dept of Aircraft Production
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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The 'Beaufort Home' project was Australia's first successful venture into prefabricated houses. The Beaufort House erected in Ainslie in 1947 is one of the few extant, and is the only one in Canberra. It has a particularly high degree of technical and creative achievement, being built to demonstrate the invention by the architect Arthur Baldwinson and his technical staff in the Beaufort Division of the Commonwealth Department of Aircraft Production of the predominantly steel prefabricated 'Beaufort Home' produced directly after World War 2 by converting an aircraft factory to peace time needs. As such it has strong associations with the phase in Australian history when there was a desperate need for housing, with a wave of new migrants and returned servicemen all looking for accommodation, and prefabricated houses from factories were considered the way of the future. As a 1940s prefabricated house it is unique in Canberra in its comparative intactness, and has the potential to be used as a research and teaching site to provide information on prefabricated housing design and construction.

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The Beaufort House is a good example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style of architecture. It demonstrates the style's broad characteristics of simplicity, lightness, freshness, unpretentiousness, delicacy and elegance, and indicators peculiar to the style: a low-pitched gable roof; narrow edges to the roof and glass walls with regularly spaced mullions. It is notable for demonstrating the main structural and construction characteristic of this style: making use of the availability of new materials to achieve an innovative framing technique.

Background/History

During World War II, the resources of Australia's building industry were turned to the war effort. Materials were scarce and domestic buildings were subject to strict guidelines in terms of size and expenditure. These restrictions continued into the post-war years when there was a desperate need for housing, with a wave of new migrants and returned servicemen all looking for accommodation. The prefabricated 'Beaufort Home' (1946), designed by architect Arthur Baldwinson and his technical staff, including the Russian-born architect Anatol Kagan, in the Beaufort Division of the Commonwealth Department of Aircraft Production, were part of a government scheme to alleviate housing shortages. The scheme was seen as a method of converting

munitions factories to peace time needs. Even before production commenced there were orders for 5,000 houses for the Victorian Housing Commission and 5,500 for the Commonwealth War Service Homes Commission.¹ Only 23 were built.² Although ultimately abandoned, it was a pioneering venture into prefabricated housing design and production.³

There were 8 configurations of the 'Beaufort Home', ranging from two to four bedrooms, and the Type 1, with two bedrooms, was erected in May 1946 in the Treasury Gardens, Melbourne for the Victorian Housing Commission. It was open for public viewing during the month of June and several other houses were built in Pascoe Vale.⁴ The Commonwealth Minister for Works and Housing, Nelson Lemmon, who was keen to popularise the project, instructed that a demonstration house be erected in Canberra, and insisted that it be open for inspection.⁵ On 10 March 1947 19.5 tons of prefabricated steel components and built-in furniture arrived on a truck and semi-trailer at the site selected in Cowper Street Ainslie and the foundations were marked out. Within nine days the Type 4 house was completed.⁶ The press reported: "An outstanding feature of the house is that it has been designed to catch as much of the rays of the sun as possible. Spacious windows are set on three sides."⁷ Five days later the Director of Works ACT was told: "The Minister desires that some fairly large Roman Cyprus trees be placed in position at the Beaufort House in order to break the expanse of windows in front of the house."⁸ Two such trees were duly planted, one to shade the front bedroom windows and the other outside the side bedroom window. By 1951 the trees had grown higher than the house, but they were removed during the Goudie's ownership, when retractable canvas blinds were installed.⁹

On Friday 18 April 1947 the Prime Minister, Mr Chifley inspected the house. Next day a cordial invitation was advertised in the press for the public "to see the latest developments in modern home building by the Aircraft Factories at the Beaufort Division, Department of Aircraft Production" from Saturday 19 to Sunday 27 April.¹⁰ During that time 4644 people viewed the house. The house had furniture and furnishings on loan from Cusack's Furniture Store. In early May the house was occupied by an officer of the Department of Works and Housing, Ronald Mendelsohn, his wife Ruth and baby Oliver. Mendelsohn and experimental building station experts reported to their Minister on the first six weeks of his occupation, with the thermal qualities and durability of the house and others in the district being compared. "Experiments bore out the contention of the experimental building station that the steel home retains its temperature in winter better than a brick house."¹¹ Mendelsohn continued to report on the performance of the house while he and his family occupied it throughout 1947, and found no major problems.¹² Two other comparable Beaufort houses, in Sandringham and West Fooscray in Melbourne, were being tested at that time.¹³ In 1948 the incoming Victorian Liberal-Country Party Government, pledged to oppose socialism, cancelled the Beaufort Houses project.¹⁴ The shortage of steel at the time and the objections raised in Parliament over its use in houses rather than ships were the reasons for the abandonment of the project by the Commonwealth Government.¹⁵

By 1949 the occupants of the Beaufort House were Melbourne and Ann Pratt.¹⁶ When it was put up for sale in 1954, Eric Goudie, from Sydney, who had been appointed to a position in Canberra as a post office clerk, and his wife Catherine bought the house for £3000. They had one daughter.¹⁷ The Goudies kept the house in near original condition, although making minor additions in the 1970s-80s.¹⁸ Catherine, known as May,

¹ Department of Works and Housing, NAA, A292/5 C23639

² Richard E. Apperly & Peter Reynolds, *Baldwinson, Arthur Norman* in ADB, 1993, ANU

³ State Library of NSW, Discover Collections, *Beaufort Homes*

⁴ Philip Goad, in "Prefabrication" in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, p 560, CUP, 2012

⁵ Bruce Wright, *Cornerstone of the Capital*, p 34, ACT Housing, 2000

⁶ The manufacturing plate on the house is inscribed Type 2, Number 4.

⁷ *The Canberra Times*, p 2, 21 March 1947

⁸ Bruce Wright, p 35

⁹ ACT Heritage Library Images ACT reference 9273 (1951) and Australian photo database (1986) rt 32209

¹⁰ *The Canberra Times*, pp 2 & 5, 19 April 1947

¹¹ *The Canberra Times*, p 4, 1 July 1947

¹² Bruce Wright, p 35

¹³ Register of the National Estate database, *Beaufort Steel House*, Place ID 16099

¹⁴ Philip Goad, p 560

¹⁵ Bruce Wright, p 35

¹⁶ ACT Electoral Roll, 1949

¹⁷ Bruce Wright, p 35

¹⁸ Anthony Hoffman, owner in 2012

died in 2005 and Eric died in 2006.¹⁹ The house was auctioned on 11 March 2007 and bought by Anthony Hoffman, who is living in the house with his wife and children in 2012. With the assistance of an ACT Heritage grant from the ACT Government, he is restoring the porch to its 1947 condition.²⁰

Arthur Baldwinson

Arthur Norman Baldwinson (1908-1969) was born in Kalgoorlie and trained as an architect at the Gordon Institute of Technology at Geelong. In 1931 he won the RVIA Silver Medal and travelled to England. He worked in London with Australian expatriate Raymond McGrath and from 1934 with leading English modernist Maxwell Fry. Baldwinson became assistant to Walter Gropius when the pioneer modernist architect joined Fry's practice in 1935. Baldwinson returned to Australia in 1937 and after working with Stephenson and Turner in Melbourne and Sydney he set up an individual practice in 1938. Baldwinson closed his practice during the war years and was employed by the Department of Aircraft Production, designing and constructing buildings for the manufacture of Beaufort aircraft. He designed the 'Beaufort Home', Australia's first successful prefabricated house, while working for the department. After the war he recommenced his practice, with a number of different partners over the ensuing years. Baldwinson was appointed senior lecturer in architecture at the University of Sydney, a position he held until his death. His architectural practice continued and Baldwinson, Booth and Peters won the RAI (NSW) Sulman Medal in 1956 for the Belmont Hotel, Belmont. He designed houses for a number of artists and photographers, including William Dobell, Max Dupain, Douglas Annand, Desiderius Orban and Elaine Haxton. He was an early exponent of modernist architecture in Australia and his work was widely published in contemporary journals and books²¹

The only other house in Canberra designed by Baldwinson (in 1951) is at 13 Tennyson Crescent, Forrest. His modernist design had an L-shaped plan with generous living and recreational spaces.²² Although its form is still apparent, by 2012 it had been much altered and greatly extended.

Description

The Beaufort House in Ainslie is 95.5 square metres in area and consists of a front porch, living room, dinette, kitchen, bathroom and three bedrooms, plus a laundry and WC entered from a back porch. It's prefabricated steel structure is based on a 0.6 metre square grid and uses wall frames of Z-rib 16-gauge steel sections clad externally in 18-gauge spot welded steel sheets, which form a stressed skin to brace the whole structure. This is a construction technique derived from aircraft building. The steel is zincannealed for permanence. Walls are packed with 50mm rock-wool insulating batts. The ceiling insulation is a mixture of cork, rock-wool and cellulose fibre. Internal linings are 12mm fibrous plaster. Steel roof trusses support the gabled roof, pitched at 20 degrees and clad in ribbed steel sheet roofing. T&G hardwood floor boards are nailed to the steel joists, which have a sandwich of wood bolted between them. All floors are wooden and are supported on brick piers. There are timber doors, some with glazed panels, in steel frames. The windows are vertically-proportioned steel-framed casements with internal sliding fly-screens. The kitchen, dinette, living room and bedrooms have windows considered generous in size at the time of construction. Adjustable canvas awnings have been added to protect the windows facing east, north and west from the sun. The steel eaves lining and verges are integral with the roof gutters – another technique from aircraft building. Steel-framed screen walls at the front porch and back door have obscure glass panels. There was an unusual fireplace in the living room, (known as the Wonderheat) which could burn coal, coke or wood, constructed as an air-conditioning unit with ducts to convey warmed air to the dinette and kitchen. Bench and upper cupboards, with a servery, separate the dinette and kitchen, which Baldwinson termed a "scientific kitchen" with carefully-calculated counter heights and traffic patterns. All bedrooms have built-in wardrobes and the hall has a linen press, above which is the electric hot water service. Many of the original fittings survive. The garage, built much later, is separate.

The house is a good example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style of architecture. It has the style's broad characteristics of simplicity, lightness, freshness, unpretentiousness, delicacy and elegance, and indicators peculiar to the style: a low-pitched gable roof; narrow edges to roof, and glass walls with regularly spaced mullions. Innovations in framing techniques with light steel frames, making use of the availability of new materials, which are structural and construction features of this style, are particularly well displayed.

¹⁹ CDHS Newsletter No 414, Dec 2007

²⁰ Advice form Anthony Hoffman to Ken Charlton

²¹ State Library of NSW, Discover Collections: *Arthur Baldwinson*

²² Bogle, M 2008, *Arthur Baldwinson : regional modernism in Sydney 1937-1969*, p 339, PhD Thesis, School of Architecture and Design, RMIT University.

Condition

The house has a high level of integrity, with few changes. The only changes have been the enclosure of the front and back porches and the addition of window awnings. Some restoration has been completed, notably to the front porch.

ANALYSIS AGAINST THE CRITERIA PURSUANT TO S.10 OF THE *HERITAGE ACT 2004*:

(a) It demonstrates a high degree of technical or creative achievement (or both), by showing qualities of innovation, discovery, invention or an exceptionally fine level of application of existing techniques or approaches

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(f) it is a rare or unique example of its kind, or is rare or unique in its comparative intactness

The Beaufort House is the only example in Canberra of its type of prefabricated house, and is one of few extant in Australia. As a 1940s prefabricated house it is unique in Canberra in its comparative intactness.

(g) it is a notable example of a kind of place or object and demonstrates the main characteristics of that kind

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(h) it has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history

The Beaufort House has strong associations with the phase in Australian history directly after World War 2 when there was a desperate need for housing, with a wave of new migrants and returned servicemen all looking for accommodation, and prefabricated houses from factories were considered the way of the future.

(j) it has provided, or is likely to provide, information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the natural or cultural history of the ACT because of its use or potential use as a research site or object, teaching site or object, type locality or benchmark site

The Beaufort House has the potential to be used as a research and teaching site to provide information on prefabricated housing design and construction.