

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R 126 *DRAFT*

Name of Place: NRMA House

Address/Location: 92-94 Northbourne Avenue, Braddon

Block 8 & 9

Section 18 of Braddon

Listing Status:	Other Heritage Listings: Nil
Date of Listing:	Level of Significance: State
Citation Revision No:	Category: Commercial
Citation Revision Date:	Style: International

Date of Design: 1968	Designer: Stephenson and Turner
Construction Period: 1970	Client/Owner/Lessee: NRMA
Date of Additions: 1996 (minor)	Builder: A.V. Jennings Industries

Statement of Significance

NRMA House, designed by Stephenson and Turner (1968-1970), is of significance as a good example of the Late Twentieth Century International Style (1960-). The building incorporates key elements of the style including the use of precast concrete load bearing wall/façade units; integrated sun control devices; and plain smooth wall surfaces.

The building's design and construction is of significance for the use of a structural system of load bearing precast concrete wall panels which support long span precast prestressed floor beams. This structural system has resulted in the distinctive elegant sculptural appearance of the east and west facades. The façade wall panels incorporate the windows and a high degree of sun control. The structural system provides column free spaces and flexible floor spaces, ideal for the client, the NRMA.

Using the façade as the structural system of the building, a high quality design has been achieved. The façade precast panels finished in smooth white quartz provide an enduring appearance and design. The assertive texture of the façade is achieved through the use of sculpturally modeled precast concrete cladding panels. The overall appearance of the building is one of simplicity, rationality and elegance. The building makes an important contribution to the streetscape of Northbourne Avenue, sitting harmoniously within its landscape setting.

Practicing as Stephenson and Turner since 1937 this architectural practice has made a major contribution to high quality architecture within Australian cities. The NRMA building is an important building within their portfolio and makes a significant contribution to Canberra.

Description

Designed by Stephenson and Turner, the consulting engineers were Rankine and Hill, Quality Surveyors were Thompson and Wark, the main construction contractor was A.V. Jennings Industries and the precast façade was manufactured by Melocco Bros. Pty Ltd of Canberra.

Rectangular in shape and six storeys in height the building is approximately 10 metres from Northbourne Avenue set within a landscape setting of trees and lawns. The building has distinctive one storey high pre-cast concrete load bearing window wall components finished with exposed white quartz. The pre-cast floor system, spanning over sixty feet achieves a building entirely without columns allowing for flexible tenancy planning. This creates a basement area free of columns for car inspection services.

The architects and structural engineers worked closely to produce a system of load bearing façade units supporting long span precast prestressed floor beams. Towers on either end of the building along with the fifth floor house the building services. The towers were built of in-situ reinforced concrete using precast panels as permanent formwork. These towers or service cores have deeply recessed bands of vertical glazing to light access areas. They frame views over Canberra.

The building faces east-west. These elevations are made of precast concrete load bearing units each 13ft (3.9m) wide, one storey in height and weighing 13 tons. Each unit has three windows which are deeply recessed for sun protection and double glazed. Venetian blinds were provided in the air space. At ground level the larger window units are hermetically sealed and double glazed in dark heat absorbent glass.

The floor system is a composite structure of precast prestressed I beams, 3ft (.9m) deep spanning 64ft (19.5m) at 13ft (3.9m) centers. They are supported on steel bearing plates at the centre of the window units forming a series of pin ended frames. The bearing plate rests on a seating plate that is welded to the wall panel reinforcement. The top of the beam is connected to the wall unit by a cover plate. The I beams were fabricated in Sydney and transported by road to the site. They support the in situ slab, the two being designed for composite action.

At first floor level a precast segmental post tensioned transfer beam spans between the mullions of the larger window units and distributes the load from the mullions above to the columns on centres below.

To minimise staining on the face a narrow gutter was cast into the top surface of the window sills draining through a small aluminium pipe to an open sided aluminium channel cast into each window mullion. The veneer of white quartz aggregate was held in position by a removable form and the structural backing concrete poured behind this form. The second part of the mould forming the projecting fins was then placed in position and the pour continued immediately. The exposed quartz aggregate was finished by washing and hand trowelling.

The building was fully airconditioned with a high velocity dual duct ceiling system. It was fully carpeted above ground floor level, and Roman stone paving was used in the public areas. Two lifts serve basement to fourth floor level. White marble clads the internal area to the lifts.

Condition and Integrity

The building retains a high degree of integrity, it is largely unaltered and still accommodates the NRMA in much the same way as it was originally intended.

Refurbishment in 1996 included removal and replacement of the entrance canopies, new entry doors to Northbourne Avenue, and new signage. Internal fitout has also occurred over the years.

Background/History

Stephenson and Turner Architects

In 1921 Arthur Stephenson (1890-1967) and Hayman Meldrum established the architectural practice of Stephenson and Meldrum. In 1937 Meldrum left the firm and Donald Turner an associate partner of Stephenson and Meldrum joined Arthur Stephenson as partner, and the firm's name was changed to Stephenson and Turner. They were renowned institutional and commercial architects and were key practitioners of the Interwar Functionalist Style (c1915-c1940) exemplified in their King George V Hospital Camperdown, NSW and the Post War International Style (c1940-c1960) displayed in the General Motors Holden Complex, Melbourne (1956).

During the 1960s and 1970s Stephenson and Turner designed a number of buildings in Canberra including: in Hobart Place the AMP Building, T&G Building and the City Mutual Building (1961-67); the Royal Thai Embassy (1968-1975); Canberra College of Advanced Education in association with Hassell McConnell (1969-1975);

Central Hospital Services Complex (1971-1973); Canberra Grammar School, Physical Education Centre and Craft Centre (1971-1979); and the Central Health Laboratory (1974-1977) .

Stephenson & Turner were the architects for the National Road Motorists Association (NRMA) headquarters in Sydney and were then commissioned to design the Association's offices for Canberra. The Sydney office of Stephenson and Turner designed the building in 1968 and it was officially opened on 30 September 1970, the NRMA's Jubilee year, by the then Governor General Sir Paul Hasluck.

Precast concrete walling

During the 1960s precast concrete walling was increasingly used in the structural systems of buildings. Wall panels were successfully developed as load bearing elements to provide either the complete peripheral column structure or a permanent form work for in-situ columns and spandrels. The precast panels also came to house the window frame or to be glazed directly. This led to the reduction in cost of the building frame and the enclosing envelope, it also led to increased speed and simplicity of erection. Increased sophistication was achieved in the precast process, producing complex shapes within fine tolerances, together with high quality surface finishes reflecting refinements in selection and detailing. Significant buildings using precast walling included an earlier building by Stephenson and Turner in Melbourne, the Victorian Insurance Building (1968) and the Victorian State Laboratories by Yunken & Freeman.

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 NRMA Building is significant for its design and construction using a structural system of load bearing precast concrete wall panels which support long span precast prestressed floor beams. This structural system has resulted in the distinctive elegant sculptural east and west facades. The façade wall panels incorporate the windows and a high degree of sun control. The structural system provides column free spaces and flexible floor spaces, ideal for the client, the NRMA.

Using the façade as the structural system of the building, a high quality design has been achieved. The façade precast panels finished in smooth white quartz provide an enduring appearance and design. The assertive texture of the façade is achieved through the use of sculpturally modelled precast concrete cladding panels. The overall appearance of the building is one of simplicity, rationality and elegance. The building makes an important contribution to the streetscape of Northbourne Avenue, sitting harmoniously within its landscape setting.

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

(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

(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

(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

NRMA House designed by Stephenson and Turner, is of architectural significance as a good example of the Late Twentieth Century International Style (1960-) designed in 1968 and officially opened in 1970. The building incorporates key elements of the style including the use of a system of precast concrete load bearing wall/façade units incorporating sun control devices and plain smooth wall surfaces.

(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

Practicing as Stephenson and Turner since 1937 this architectural practice has made a major contribution to the high quality architecture within Australian cities. The NRMA building is an important building within their portfolio and makes a significant contribution to the streetscape of Northbourne Avenue and to Canberra.

(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

References

Apperly, R. Irving. R. & Reynolds, P. 'A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture' Angus and Robertson Publishers, Sydney, 1989.

Constructional Review, Sydney, August 1969, p17-25.

Constructional Review, Sydney, November 1970, p.17.

Constructional Review, Sydney, May 1971, p.24-28.

Goad, P. Wilken, R. Willis, J. 'Australian modern: the architecture of Stephenson and Turner', The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 2004.

Royal Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter. 'Canberra: An Architectural Guide to Australia's Capital'. 1982.

Stephenson & Turner 'Stephenson & Turner 1920-1970' 1970.

Other Information Sources

Stephenson and Turner Architects, Sydney Office, hold building plans on microfiche

Citation compiled by Natalie Broughton November 2004