



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

NRMA HOUSE

Blocks 7, 8 and 9 Section 18, Braddon

At its meeting of 4 June 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that NRMA House was not eligible for provisional registration. The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the NRMA House against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

NRMA House was designed in 1968 by the architectural firm of Stephenson and Turner with construction completed in 1970 by A V Jennings Industries. The system of load bearing precast concrete construction was engineered by Rankine and Hill with the facade elements cast by Melocco Bros Pty Ltd of Canberra and the internal beams cast by E. P. M. Concrete Pty Ltd in Sydney which were then transported to the ACT on trucks. Estimated to cost \$1.5m in 1968 the final cost of the build in 1971 was \$1.7m.

Stephenson and Turner

The architectural firm of Stephenson and Turner have been on the forefront of Australian architectural practice since the early 20th century. The history of the firm has been well documented in Goad et al, (2004) which notes that the firm started as Stephenson and Meldrum in 1922, but a split in 1937 created the Stephenson and Turner partnership. The company introduced modern hospital design into Australia, which remained a speciality of the firm, and they have been synonymous with architectural modernisation with the firm designing fast trains, large buildings, modern factories and even parts of the Lucas Heights Nuclear Facility. They were one of the key practitioners to introduce the International style of buildings into Australia (Apperly et al 1995) and have continued as pioneers in technologies for tall buildings such as reinforced concrete systems and sun control systems (Goad et al, 2004). The company rapidly expanded during the 1970s and 80s to become one of the largest architectural firms in the Southern Hemisphere. In 1995 they became Castles, Stephenson and Turner and in 2000 became CS&T Pty Ltd. A detailed history of the company can be found in *Australian Modern: the architecture of Stephenson & Turner* by Goad et al (2004), although the only mention of NRMA House was in the list of 'Key Buildings', even though there was a discussion in the main text about the firm's use of precast concrete construction and systems architecture during the 1960s and 1970s. In the ACT they are known for designing:

- 1965-73 Woden Valley Hospital;
- 1968-75 Royal Thai Embassy;
- 1969-75 Canberra College of Advanced Education;
- 1970 NRMA House;
- 1971-73 Central Hospital Services Complex;
- 1971-79 Canberra Grammar School Physical Education Centre and Craft Centre; and
- 1974-77 Central Health Laboratory.

NRMA

The National Roads Association started in 1920 to act as a lobby group for better roads and in 1923 became the National Roads and Motorists Association (NRMA). In 1924 it had started its roadside assistance program and then expanded its services over the years to include travel help and advice and insurance. It provided transport and other services during World War II. It has worked as an advocacy group for motorists and has achieved many improvements to road conditions, licensing and associated laws. In July 2000 the organisation split into NRMA Insurance and NRMA Motoring & Services.

The NRMA arrived in the ACT on the 2nd March 1927 when the local association of motor men decided to form an official ACT branch of the NRMA in response to the introduction of registration fees by the Federal Capital Commission (FCC). By mid-1951 the local branch of the NRMA had grown and now occupied its own garage and office designed by Kenneth Oliphant on Mort St in Braddon; previously members needed to travel to Queanbeyan to visit the nearest NRMA office. Local NRMA membership and demand for services continued to grow and in 1963 the NRMA opened a full branch office on Lonsdale St in Braddon that offered the full range of member services such as tourist information, maps, insurance, vehicle inspections and roadside assistance. This was only the second, after Newcastle, full branch office outside of Sydney. By mid-1966 the NRMA was already looking to expand the ACT office and leased two blocks of land along Northbourne Avenue for future development. The following year a third block was added to the lease to allow for a much larger building with more off-street parking facilities. The new office of NRMA House was occupied in June 1970 with *The Canberra Times* (30 June 1970, p.13) noting that the growth of motoring and reliance on the NRMA from Canberrans is evidenced by the need to move into the larger premises.

The National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) and Northbourne Avenue

From 1958 to 1989 the NCDC was responsible for the ACT's planning, development and construction. Following the establishment of the *Buildings (Design and Siting) Ordinance 1964*, the NCDC published policies in July 1967 and principles from 1968. These policies were developed by the National Capital Planning Committee (NCPC), which was a body of experts in architecture, engineering and planning, appointed to advise the NCDC. From its inception the NCDC struggled with developing policy for Northbourne Avenue. Between 1967 and 1970 the NCDC progressed three phases of reconstruction, including major replanting, for the avenue to improve traffic flow and beautify what had become the main entrance to the city from Sydney and Melbourne (NCDC Annual reports 1967-70). In an attempt to prevent Civic (City) spilling north along Northbourne Avenue, the NCDC identified zones of development. Commercial leases would only be permitted north to Haig Park, with institutional and residential leases progressing north (Sparke, 1988:129-130). Current practice, through the *National Capital Plan* and *ACT Territory Plan*, although derived from the NCDC *Buildings (Design and Siting) Ordinance 1964*, results in different expression of places fronting special avenues.

NRMA House

The NRMA had used the services of Stephenson and Turner to design their Sydney office before using the firm again for their Canberra office. The NRMA brief to the architect called for client-specific features on the first two floors and basement, but the rest of the building to allow for flexible tenancy options. The ground floor was to be the public face of the NRMA and had an open floor plan where the public would access the front desk. There was also a radio room where controllers would send out instructions to the mobile fleet of NRMA vehicles. The basement was essentially an open parking area, but along the western side was a series of vehicle inspection bays that allowed for easy access underneath cars with provision for all the tools necessary. The upper floors were designed as open floor plans with no internal walls or columns. To keep the floor space open all of the services are located in attached towers at either end that were made from in-situ reinforced concrete using pre-cast formwork. The building is currently owned by NRMA Insurance who occupy one of the floors and the rest of the floors are rented out to various tenants.

Several precast reinforced concrete elements were used to achieve the open floor plan and quick construction of the building. Precast reinforced concrete load bearing facades were introduced in the 1960s (Constructional Review, 1977) and were in wide use by the start of the 1970s. One of the iconic designs to introduce this technology was the Research Centre La Gaude for IBM in France in 1966 which demonstrated the effectiveness of the technique as well as highlighting the aesthetic possibilities (*Constructional Review* 1966). The NRMA building used locally made precast concrete facade units as load bearing elements that also incorporated sun control and water control features. The span across the building was supported by precast prestressed concrete floor beams, sourced from a specialist in Sydney, on which a reinforced concrete in situ floor slab was set.

The long thin north-south facing design allowed for a great degree of sun control. The north facade consists of less than 5% glazing with only a thin vertical strip window, while the east and west facades feature deeply set windows

incorporating sun control in the precast elements. Also integrated into the precast panels is a drainage system that directs water into channels so that it does not run across and stain the external finish. The external face of the precast elements was finished in white quartz roughcast that was incorporated into the precasting system.

The building has a large setback by virtue of being located along Northbourne Avenue which was controlled by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) planning policies at the time. The large areas of car parking and the small landscaped area in the northwest of the block, however, were the choice of the owner. The external parking area is large, originally over 100 spaces, as befits a motoring organisation. The building takes up ~20% of the available area on the three blocks, with ~60% for parking and 15% for the landscaped area with the remainder being offsets and areas between spaces. The landscaped area provides a sheltered outdoor space for the building's occupants. This, combined with generous setbacks from Northbourne Avenue and Elouera Street, help the building stand out in the city landscape, taking advantage of the prominent position.

DESCRIPTION

NRMA House is a rectangular building constructed of reinforced concrete with a white quartz finish. The facade features regular fenestration with deeply set windows that creates a series of vertical stripes between the windows and horizontal bands across the floor levels where the protruding sun control shades angle back towards the building. At the north and south ends of the building are attached towers which contain the building's services that appear almost monolithic due to their lack of features. The ground floor is surrounded by large floor-to-ceiling glazing units and the entrance to the building is located on either side in-between the south tower and the main building. Above the ground floor are four levels for occupancy and a fifth, top level contains the plant rooms.

Physical condition and integrity

A site visit by ACT Heritage on 13 September 2013 showed the building to be in good condition. There was some minor staining evident on the external concrete units commensurate with age. Modern glass awnings have been added to the entrance areas that are not sympathetic to the original design, but are minor additions that do not detract unduly to the aesthetics of the building. The basement area and inspection bays were in excellent condition and retained the work areas and fittings in the bays. The internal areas are occupied by tenants and were not available for observation.

SITE PLAN



NRMA House, Braddon

Legend

- NRMA House Boundary
- Block and Section

Image 1 NRMA House boundary

IMAGES



Image 2 NRMA House facing northwest (ACT Heritage 2013)



Image 3 NRMA House facing southwest (ACT Heritage 2013)



Image 4 NRMA House basement with inspection bays (ACT Heritage 2013)

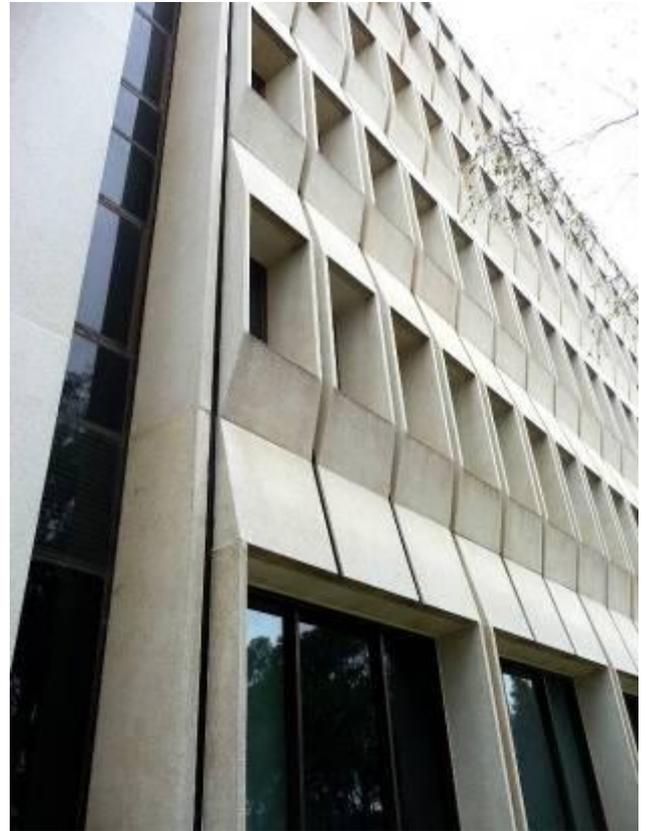


Image 5 NRMA House external detail (ACT Heritage 2013)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – [NAME OF PLACE]

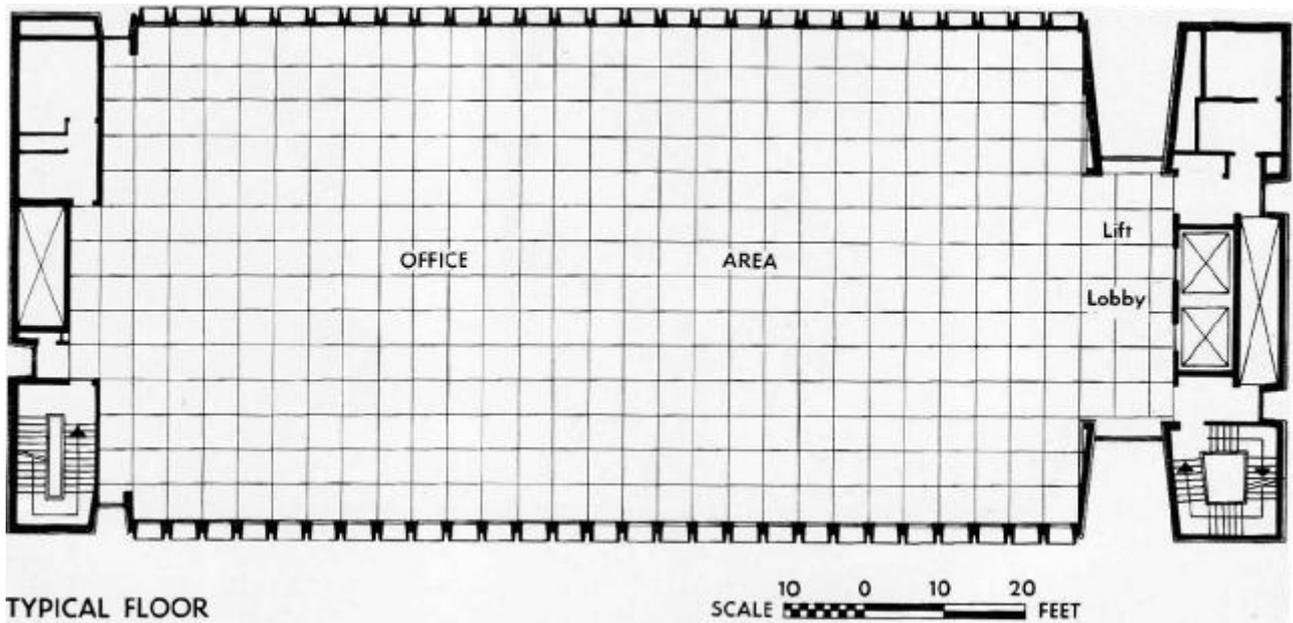


Image 6 NRMA House typical floor plan (*Constructional Review* 1971)

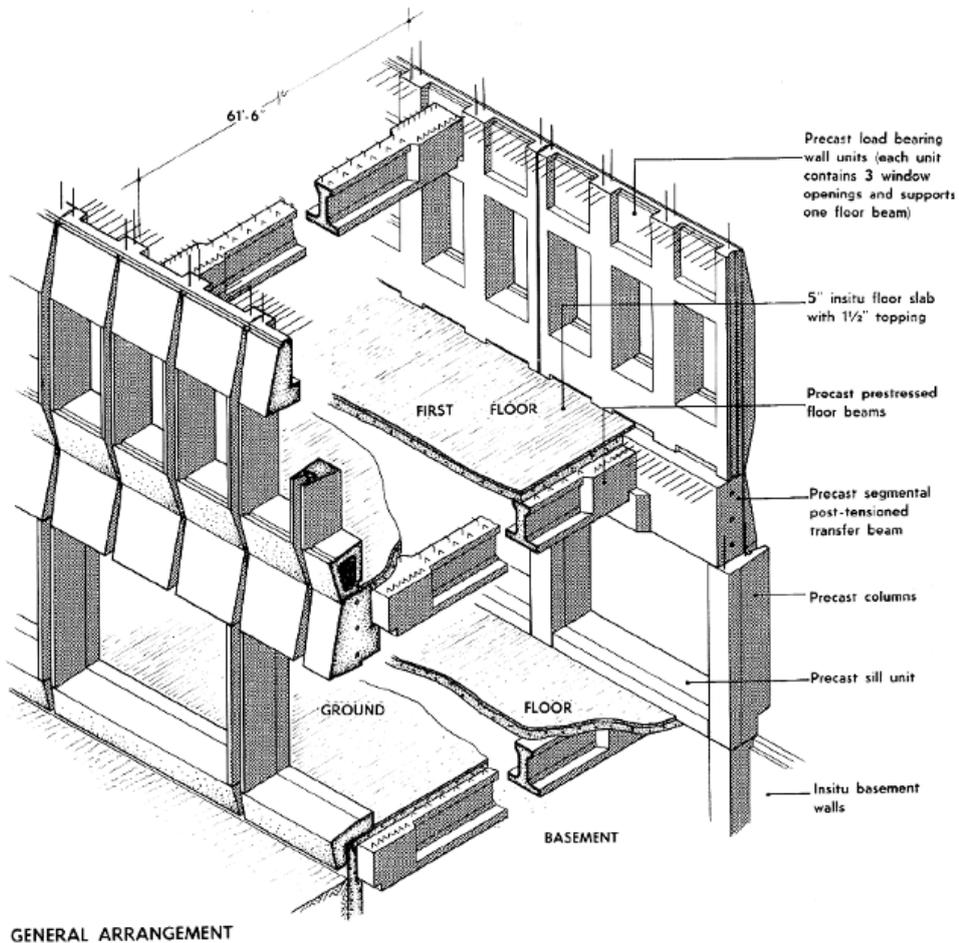


Image 7 NRMA House cross-section showing construction methods (*Constructional Review* 1971)

REFERENCES

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