

CITY OF DONCASTER & TEMPLESTOWE HERITAGE STUDY.

11 OLD WARRANDYTE ROAD, DONVALE. A19.

HISTORY : This is a house of pise de terre (rammed earth) construction, designed and built in 1949-50, for Mrs F.W. (Maria) Fawcett, who still lives there. The designer was the late Nell Norris, and the builder was Mr Henshell, who had built several pise houses.¹ The use of earth construction was opposed by the Shire Council.

Eleanora (Nell) Norris was an architect and the first wife of the architect Marcus H. Norris, who was in partnership with Robert Hamilton. The recent marriage of Eleanora Edna Edeson with Marcus H. Norris was reported in the RVIA Journal, March 1936.² Nell was slightly older than Marcus and a wealthy woman. The marriage was not a happy one and lasted about five years. Together they designed two townhouses in Toorak, but Nell Norris did very little private work. Her working drawings of a brick house for Arthur John Phillips at Washington Street, Toorak (undated) and for C.E. Tobias at Waverley Road, Glen Waverley (also undated) are held at University of Melbourne. However, this is the only design by her alone, known to have been built.³

Nell Norris died in her fifties, on 12 May 1955 of a brain tumour, leaving no relatives. Marcus made no claim to her estate and she left £43,275. to found a bequest fund to defray the costs of a new school of architecture at the University of Melbourne. This did not proceed within the five year limit specified, so the amount was stipulated to be used to provide "Nell Norris Scholarships" to assist needy architecture students, to encourage research, to grant special prizes and otherwise promote the study of architecture. It has generally been used by the Department of Architecture and Building since 1974 to fund fellowships for visiting academic staff, to provide studio partitions, travel grants for staff and a "sculptor in residence". Nell Norris had done a little lecturing at the University and had also been librarian there.⁴ There is an oil portrait of her there by William (Jock) Frater, c1955.⁵

Maria Fawcett had a shop in Burke Road, Camberwell opposite Mont Albert Road in the mid-1950s, selling exquisite flower arrangements and exotic imported jewellery and nick-nacks. The business later continued from this house, in a garden setting of "marvellous ancient roses imported from France, climbing on pergolas and white frangipani."⁶

VISUAL DESCRIPTION : The house is approached by a long driveway into an axe-head shaped block and set in a pine forest, overlooking the Wembley Gardens valley. It is not visible from the road and could not be inspected. The garden is said to include pergolas and significant plantings of old and rare(?) French roses and frangipani.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS : Only one other pise building is known in the City : 44A Garden Road, Donvale, built for the artist Harry Den Hartog, also about 1950. There are three adobe (mud brick) buildings known : at 152 Brackenbury Street, 88 and 90 Yarra Street, Warrandyte. There is a wattle and daub house at 32 Mullens Road, Warrandyte and in the 1853 section of "Friedensruhe", 10 Waldau Court, Doncaster. Earth construction is of course, commonplace in the Shire of Eltham⁷, but was not supported in Doncaster and Templestowe. No other buildings designed by Nell Norris are known, other than two townhouses designed with her then husband Marcus H. Norris in Toorak.

SIGNIFICANCE : Of local architectural significance as a rare example of pise de terre construction in the City, and as the only known sole design by the architect Nell Norris, donor of the Nell Norris Scholarship to University of Melbourne architecture students. It is in a beautiful forest setting, within a romantic garden with important plantings. The house was designed and built in 1949-50 for the present owner, Maria Fawcett, who has lived there ever since.

INTACTNESS : Presumably good?

CONDITION & THREATS : Presumably good condition?

REFERENCES : 1. Maria Fawcett in a telephone conversation with Geoffrey Wright, 27 September, 1991.
2. RVIA Journal March 1936, p.16, recorded in Miles Lewis et al., compiler, Architectural Index. Both Marcus and Nell were associates of the RVIA.
3. Lewis, op.cit. Toorak residence : WD.HOV 216. Glen Waverley residence : WD.HOV 216, in the Architecture and Planning Branch Library, Drawing Collection, The University of Melbourne.
4. Alison Norris in conversation with Geoffrey Wright, 22 July 1993. Alison Norris is Marcus' second wife, also an architect and retired partner of Marcus Alison Norris Architects. She has just completed her autobiography and holds press cuttings on Nell Norris and the architectural drawings for the Toorak townhouses. Marcus Norris died a few months ago.
5. The University of Melbourne Calendar, 1988, pp.619-621 and the Department of Architecture and Building, University of Melbourne Information Guide, November 1986, 2nd Edition. Nell Norris was living at 23 Turnbull Avenue, Toorak when she died.
6. The University of Melbourne, Museum of Art Assistant Registrar, Sarah Epskamp, letter to Geoffrey Wright, 26 July 1993 and print extract of Art Collection Database. Accession no. 0000 0026 000 000. Gift of Mrs D.D. Kemelfield.
7. Mrs Betty Blunden in conversation with Richard Peterson and Geoffrey Wright, 24 July 1993.
8. The builder, John Harcourt constructed several pise de terre and stone cottages in Eltham in the 1940s. Several survive along the west bank of the Diamond Creek, in Stanhope Street.