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Women on the Heritage Register

The Case of Nellie McCredie and Uanda House

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Uanda house is of historical importance to Queensland both in terms of its architectural design and its social history. Uanda is a low set, single-storey house built in 1928, located in the inner city Brisbane suburb of Wilston. Architecturally, the house has a number of features that distinguish it from the surrounding bungalow influenced inter-war houses. The house has been described as a Queensland style house with neo-Georgian influences. Historically, it is associated with the entry of women into the profession of architecture in Queensland. Uanda is the only remaining intact work of architect / draftsman Nellie McCredie and one of a very few examples of works by pioneering women architects in Queensland. The house was entered into the Queensland Heritage Register, in 2000, after an appeal against Brisbane City Council's refusal of an application to demolish the house was disputed in the Queensland Planning and Environment court in 1998/1999. In the court's report, Judge Robin QC, DCJ, stated that, "The importance of preserving women's history and heritage, often previously marginalised or lost, is now accepted at government level, recognising that role models are vital for bringing new generations of women into the professions and public life."

While acknowledging women's contribution to the profession of architecture is an important endeavour, it also has the potential to isolate women architects as separate to a mainstream history of architecture. As Julie Willis writes, it can imply an atypical, feminine style of architecture. What is the impact or potential implications of recognising heritage buildings designed by women architects? The Judge also highlights the absence of a recorded history of unique Brisbane houses and questions the authority of the heritage register. This research looks at these points of difference through a case study of the Uanda house. The paper will investigate the processes of adding the house to the heritage register, the court case and existing research on Nellie McCredie and Uanda House.



The Brisbane City Council Heritage Unit was established in 1987 to identify and protect buildings of cultural and historical significance.¹ The Unit's heritage database is compiled from previous town plans. New buildings are added to the register at the discretion of architects and historians employed by the heritage unit.² This paper outlines a preliminary investigation into the dispute over the initial addition of a house to the heritage register in 1998. The house at the centre of the dispute, Uanda House designed by Nellie McCredie in 1928, was officially added to the heritage register in March 2000.³ From the transcript of the Judge's decision in the court case, this research has identified three topics for discussion. The first point of discussion raised by the Judge addressed the work of women architects added to the heritage register on the grounds of their gender and not necessarily the merits of the work. The second topic identified was the limitations set by classifying heritage buildings in town planning documents to the processes of identifying heritage or "character" houses. The third issue highlighted in the court case was the authority of the heritage register and its effectiveness in protecting buildings of cultural or historical significance. This research uses Uanda House as a case study to examine these three topics raised by the judge.

Background: Uanda House

Nellie McCredie graduated from the architecture course at the University of Sydney in 1923. McCredie was from a well-known family of architects in Sydney. She moved to Brisbane in 1925 where she worked for the public service on buildings in various locations throughout Queensland. In 1928 she was commissioned by the Jack family to design a family home for 27 Clifton Street in Wilston.⁴ The house has been described as a "Queenslander with Neo-Georgian influences," with its tiled roof, symmetrical front porch and refined modest street elevation.⁵ Set amongst Clifton Street's mostly asymmetrical high set bungalows, Uanda house appeared as though it was built in an entirely different era. The house contained a number of internal features that the Jack family described as "ahead of its time,"⁶ including a laundry chute, floor to ceiling cupboards in the kitchen and built in cupboards between the bathroom and one of the bedrooms.⁷

Throughout its history Uanda house was subject to a number of alternations and additions. At some point the veranda had

1. "Brisbane City Council Heritage Register," online at <http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/planning-building-selling-renovating/renovating-restoring-and-extending/restoring-and-researching-heritage-properties/heritage-register/index.htm> (accessed October 8, 2012).

2. "Brisbane City Council Heritage Register."

3. "Queensland Government Department of Environment and Heritage Protection – Queensland Heritage Register – Uanda House," online at <https://www.derm.qld.gov.au/chimsi/placeDetail.html?siteId=16893> (accessed October 22, 2012).

4. Heather Harper, "A Thoughtful Approach," *National Trust Journal* (October/November 1999): 42-48.

5. *Michel v. Brisbane City Council*, Qpelr 374, 1999.

6. Harper, "A Thoughtful Approach," 42-48

7. Harper, "A Thoughtful Approach," 42-48

8. Harper, "A Thoughtful Approach," 42-48

9. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

10. "Price Finder - Sales Report – 27 Clifton Street, Wilston, 01-02-2000," online at <http://www.pdslive.com.au/pdsv4/app?component=propertyDetail.saleLink&page=pr...> (accessed February 1, 2012).

11. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

12. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

13. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

14. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

Figure 1. Street Elevation of Uanda House to Clifton Street. Distinctly symmetrical with central pronounced porch and tiled roof.

been enclosed, which detracted from the unique symmetrical Neo-Georgian street front of the house. Then in 1966 the house was converted into a duplex, altering aspects of the original design intent.⁸ The primary use of land was therefore classified for multi unit dwellings, so when the house was purchased in 1998, the new owner sought to demolish the house and build two new residences on the block.⁹ The house was not listed on the heritage register and did not appear to comply with the features of a character house as described in Brisbane City Council's (BCC) City Plan.¹⁰ Consequently, the new owner hired an architect to design two units, one for his family and one for an elderly relative.¹¹ The owner chose an architect with considerable heritage experience, who in his wisdom, deduced that the unusual house was not a heritage or character building and was outside of the character classifications listed in the City Plan. The architect lodged the Development Application to demolish Uanda house and build the two new units. The Development Application received very few responses from residents on Clifton Street and these were exclusively comments regarding the aesthetics of the new units and nothing in relation to the demolition of Uanda House.¹² It wasn't until BCC's heritage unit initiated research on the house that they discovered the significance of its designer, Nellie McCredie, one of a very few practicing female architects in Brisbane during the interwar period.¹³

The distinct design of the house was driven by McCredie's own criticism of the bungalow as described in her own thesis, "The Aesthetic Improvement of our Environment." McCredie advocated for suburban cottages of "simplicity and refinement."¹⁴ Her ideas



on a model suburb were later published in the *Architectural and Building Journal of Queensland* in 1925.¹⁵ However, this alternative approach to residential design was what prompted the architect commissioned in 1998 to describe the house as a “brumby” ready for demolition.¹⁶

15. Bronwyn Hanna and Julie Willis, *Women Architects in Australia 1900–1950* (Canberra: Royal Australian Institute of Architects, 2001).

16. *Michel v Brisbane City Council*.

Women on the Heritage Register

The aesthetic qualities of Uanda house were indeed a point of contention argued throughout the court case. Whether the house should have been preserved on the grounds of its unique design was not successfully argued in the case. The social history of the house’s architect was more pertinent to the argument for adding the house to the heritage register. The Appellant in the case argued that this was inadequate grounds for preventing the demolition of the house. An excerpt from court case transcript reads:

The Appellant’s architect . . . , who has impressive qualifications and experience as a conservation architect, gives the opinion that this is not enough to produce a heritage building. His expert view is that the house is utterly undistinguished, that it is inappropriate to preserve it as an example of the architecture of a woman. He says nothing about the house marks it out as designed by a woman, and no-one suggested the contrary.¹⁷

17. *Michel v Brisbane City Council*.

However, one of the heritage unit’s historians did draw a specific relationship between the design of the house and women architects. Uanda house’s unique kitchen and bathroom joinery and the laundry chute that was “ahead of its time,” supported ideas that women architects were better equipped to design domestic spaces.¹⁸ Whether McCredie embraced this opinion or not is unknown, but not all women felt that their contribution to architecture lay entirely in residential design. In fact some found this association between women and domestic design set a limitation on the types of buildings they might work on in their careers.¹⁹ In the first half of the twentieth century women architects faced a number of other barriers to the advancement of their careers including, difficulties in accessing training, unequal pay and opportunities, expectations on lifestyle after marriage and many other disadvantages that have been outlined by Julie Willis and Bronwyn Hanna in their book *Women Architects in Australia 1900–1950*.²⁰

18. Harper, “A Thoughtful Approach,” 42–48.

19. Hanna and Willis, *Women Architects in Australia*.

20. Hanna and Willis, *Women Architects in Australia*.

Judge Robin was sympathetic to these struggles in his decision. An expert historian for the case argued that McCredie's career in architecture was short lived due to difficulties encountered by women architects in the 1920s. However, the appellant argued that she only came to Queensland to study pottery under L. J. Harvey and not to pursue her career in architecture, as she later found fame in pottery when she returned to Sydney.²¹ The appellant therefore challenged her significance as an architect. The Judge agreed with the expert historian that McCredie's shift from architecture to pottery was more than likely influenced by the challenges women architects faced in the early twentieth century and that regardless of the longevity of her career Uanda house was significant because of its female designer.²² The Judge decided:

21. Harper, "A Thoughtful Approach," 42-48.

22. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

[the expert witness] theorises that she was forced or kept out of architecture by the Great Depression. It is really all speculation. I would find it difficult to regard a woman working full time as an architect in the 1920's as not serious about architecture. There is nothing to show that she made any effort to keep up the practice of architecture in the 1930's or afterwards. My opinion is that what matters is McCredie's being a pioneering woman in a professional field in Brisbane in the late 1920's, who has left this one work to establish it. It seems to me irrelevant that she may not have been a University medallist, or the first female architect to qualify or work as such or to join a professional body.²³

23. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

Judge Robin continued throughout the court case to emphasise the importance of recording a history of women in professions. As pointed out by Willis and Hanna, there is a significant gap in the history of women in the profession of architecture. While the aesthetic merits of Uanda house were difficult to appraise, the contribution the house makes to a history of women in professions was substantial by itself in the eyes of the Judge:

The importance of preserving women's history and heritage, often previously marginalised or lost, is now accepted at government level, recognising that role models are vital for bringing new generations of women into the professions and public life I am not sure whether such government level acceptance as there may be is seen as trend-setting or as belated. In my view the "acceptance" is (and ought to be) general in the community.²⁴

24. Michel v Brisbane City Council.



When reading the documentation accompanying the house's heritage listing, the majority of the information centres around biographical details on Nellie McCredie and the suspected difficulties she may have encountered with the profession of architecture in the interwar years.²⁵ Willis's work on women in architectural history points out that the work of women is often associated with an alternative history to the mainstream.²⁶ The listing of Uanda House is testament to this reasoning, where the merits of the design of the house are secondary to the gender of the architect.

25. "Queensland Government Department of Environment and Heritage Protection – Wucensland Heritage Register – Uanda House," online at <https://www.derm.qld.gov.au/chimsi/placeDetail.html?siteId=16893> (accessed October 22, 2012).

26. Julie Willis, "Invisible Contributions: The Problem of History and Women Architects," *Architectural Theory Review* 3, no. 2 (2009): 57-68.



Figure 2. Uanda House's tiled roof amongst the timber and tin traditional character homes on Clifton Street

Classifying Brisbane's Interwar Heritage Houses

The decision to add the house to the heritage register was overshadowed by the social history of the house, where the term "rarity" was assigned to the architect's gender and not to the design of the house.

The house has rarity value, but "rarity" is not a consideration under the Town Plan, which focuses on heritage, as defined (covering the historical aspect) and character, as defined. Rarity, indeed, may serve to exclude a particular building considered on its own merits alone, from the "protective" provisions. Rarity, in this case, is not a feature of the house, considered alone, rather it is a feature of the link with a particular architect, discovered only on search.²⁷

27. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

The unique design intent, supported by McCredie's thesis, is under celebrated in the case of Uanda house. This unconventional house makes a valuable contribution to the history of Brisbane's architecture and housing. Arguing the qualities of the house in court may have led the case into subjective territory, where any decision could

28. Michel v Brisbane City Council.

29. "Brisbane City Council – City Plan 2000 – Chapter 3 Areas and Assessment," online at <http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/planning-building/planning-guidelines-and-tools/city-plan-zones-codes/city-plan-2000-document/chapter-3-areas-and-assessment-processes/index.htm> (accessed January 24, 2013).

30. "Brisbane City Council – City Plan – Chapter 4 Local Plans," online at <http://www.brisbane.qld.gov.au/planning-building/planning-guidelines-and-tools/city-plan-zones-codes/city-plan-2000-document/chapter-4-local-plans/index.htm> (accessed January 24, 2013).

31. "Brisbane City Council – City Plan – Chapter 4 Local Plans."

be easily contested. The focus on the history of the architect made for solid reasoning for conserving the house. The disregard paid to distinct houses, such as Uanda house, is inherent in the way City Plan considers heritage and character houses. Interestingly, the features that exclude Uanda House from classifications under City Plan; features that the appellant in this case "claimed to work to such sad effect in Clifton Street,"²⁸ are the features promoted in McCredie's thesis.

The City Plan lists, in some cases also illustrates, a number of housing types that are under "demolition control" in Chapter Three²⁹ under specific Local Area Plans (LAPs) and Chapter Four³⁰ under character housing. These houses are classified by a number of distinct features including materials, street elevation composition, roof structures, glazing, structure and decorative elements. Uanda House does not fall under any of these classifications or group together any of the descriptive features set out in the town plan. These classifications only include typical pre 1946 housing "styles," an example of the illustrations included in City Plan can be seen in figure three below. These prescriptive classifications potentially exclude atypical heritage and character houses from being protected under the plan. It could be argued that the City Plan does little to protect unique, even inimitable houses.

The judge attributes this failing of the City Plan to a lack of work published and awareness of the history of Brisbane's housing. The Judge criticised the town plan, saying that the

suggested "mongrel," identifying the house as a Queenslander with neo-Georgian influences. It seems to me this is a field in which there is much for architectural historians to achieve. Unsurprisingly, Australia-wide categorisations of inter-war housing are not necessarily applicable in Queensland. The relevant local publications are not comprehensive ... for the first time it seems, used the expression "a Queensland style house with neo-Georgian influences." The LAP for the Grange ... has an illustration of "Georgian revival" depicting a somewhat grander dwelling of two storeys, under the heading "Less Common Interwar Houses."³¹

There are a number of publications on the history of Queensland heritage and character houses. These publications act to define qualities of Queensland houses as well as information on conserving and restoring pre-war homes. Some of the larger anthologies on the history of Australian houses include some



details on Queensland heritage houses. There are also detailed publications by the National Trust on the history and conservation of typical heritage Queensland homes.³² Additionally, there is a publication by the Brisbane History Group, titled *Brisbane House Styles 1880 to 1940: A Guide to the Affordable House* which classifies and lists qualities specific to Queensland interwar houses.³³ The Brisbane History Group also has published a book on the history of Wilston in which Uanda House and Nellie McCredie is featured.³⁴

The gap in Brisbane's history of housing is in the unique (or less common) houses commissioned to architects such as McCredie. A majority of Brisbane's pre war houses were built in large numbers by government departments of public works. The documentation for these houses, such as original drawings and specifications, have been maintained and made easily accessible to historians. As the judge in this case suggests, more work needs to be undertaken by historians to document and classify these less common houses.

Heritage Register and the Courts

It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for the appellant in this case who bought this unusual house under the pretence that there would be no legal reason that the house could not be demolished. The appellant had specifically bought the block to build the two units he desired and had sought the advice of an architect with substantial experience in heritage buildings, only to have his plans thwarted after the comments period for the Development Application had closed. At no point prior to this had anyone been aware of the significance of this unusual house. The National Trust and Brisbane City Council's Heritage Unit worked quickly to add the house to the heritage register to prevent its demolition, upon discovery of the house's architect. However, did adding the house to the list necessarily give the National Trust or BCC authority to prevent the demolition of the house? What legal standing does the heritage register represent? The judge elaborated on this problem in his decision:

the Councillors who made the final decision and the committee which considered the house beforehand being unaware of the existence of an opposite body of opinion regarding the house's merits. [The Appellant] was given no opportunity to be heard against the proposal for listing. He and his advisers were understandably displeased at being ambushed, so to speak.

32. Ian Evans, *The Queensland House: History and Conservation* (New South Wales: The Flanel Flower Press, 2001).

33. James Rechner, *Brisbane House Styles 1880 to 1940: A Guide to the Affordable House* (Brisbane: Brisbane History Group, 1998).

34. Beres McCallum and Pamela Masel, *Walking a Changing Wilston* (Lutwyche, Qld.: Windsor & Districts Historical Society Inc., 2012)

Presumably ... the Trust acted in the hope that the Court might be influenced by the listing in determining this appeal. Personally, I am unconcerned about that, being of the view that in practice, circumstances will inevitably arise from time to time in which such last-minute steps seem to those interested to preserve something seen by them to have important heritage value to be the best or only course of action. While I see nothing wrong in this, I do not purport to speak for other Judges. Now that the listing has happened, the Court ought to know about it. It would bring discredit on the system if the Court refused to know. In the circumstances, it would be unfair to [the Appellant] for the Court to place any weight on the listing. I say that without suggesting the listing is unmerited. The listing has no legal standing.³⁵

35. Michel V Brisbane City Council

Without any legal standing how does the heritage register enforce the protection of historical buildings and places? Since the Venice Charter in 1964 the emphasis on heritage by all levels of government has increased internationally.³⁶ Over the last twenty years state governments and a growing number of local councils in Australia have moved to establish heritage registers and departments to manage them. How heritage listed buildings are valued by the broader community might determine whether they could ever have any legal standing. Studies have shown that heritage listed houses do attract higher sale prices in character suburbs than houses that are not heritage listed.³⁷ This would indicate that the community places some value in heritage registers. However, acceptance by the community of heritage-registered buildings would appear to be assumed and the judge's assertion that the heritage register has no legal standing brings into question its effective role. Had the case of Uanda house been awarded in favour of the appellant, this would set precedence for buildings to be removed from the register into the future.

36. Yahaya Ahmad, "The Scope and Definitions of Heritage: From Tangible to Intangible," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 12, no. 3 (2006): 292–300.

37. Vinita Deodhar, "Does the Housing Market Value Heritage? Some Empirical Evidence," *Macquarie Economics Research Papers* 3 (2004).

Conclusion

The transcript of the court case appealing the addition of Uanda house to the heritage register reads as a thorough historical account on the house. The transcript relayed and analysed two opposing views on the same house and arrived at a conclusion on the house's heritage significance. Through the contestation of the BCC Heritage Unit's decision, a rigorous reasoning for conserving Uanda house was reached. There would be other houses on the



heritage register that lack this rigorous reasoning for their listing. It is through the court case that the historical sources are forced to interact, to be tested by opposing views on the subject. History and the law have always been closely tied.³⁸ In the same way that a lawyer must argue persuasively to convince a judge or jury, a historian must provide enough evidence to produce an impression of authenticity. Where the historian might detect a problem, as when the BCC's heritage unit searched and found the unique history of Uanda house's architect, a judge can find the grounds for a position.

38. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian: Marginal Notes on a Late-Twentieth-Century Miscarriage of Justice*, trans. Anthony Shugaar (London: Verso, 1999).

The Judge also highlighted broader concerns in the heritage listing of houses. There is a lack of historical work on Brisbane's housing, beyond the mass produced homes, in the prewar and interwar years. This gap includes a detailed survey of houses designed by architects in this era, other than the bungalows recognised by City Plan. Greater awareness of Brisbane's atypical houses might have avoided the owners of Uanda house the losses they incurred in purchasing the lot, lodging the Development Application through council, paying architects' fees for advice and design services and then eventually going to court. The appellant's loss afforded the recognition of an otherwise forgotten house. As a result of this contestation over the preservation of Uanda House, McCredie's architectural work is now mentioned in a number of publications. Of the three topics identified from the court transcript this absence of a rigorous survey and history of Brisbane housing is central to this case and a compelling observation to the discourse of architectural history.

Despite the lack of broad knowledge on what constitutes a Brisbane heritage or character house, the house would not have been added to register if it weren't for the significance of its female architect. Undoubtedly, as the judge clearly points out, acknowledging the contribution women make to the professions paves the way for women in professional roles. However, as the architect in the appellant's case argued, is this an adequate reason for classifying the house as heritage? It is my opinion that this is problematic and illustrates Willis' argument that documenting women's contribution to architectural history in this way constrains women to an alternative history of architecture. There are merits in the design of the house, where McCredie was bold enough to design a unique, Neo-Georgian house, amongst a street occupied entirely by high set bungalows. This alone, should to have been enough in the case of protecting Uanda house from demolition.