

Art Deco 'Battleship'

Described as a battleship and a "Xanadu in jazz", "Burnham Beeches", designed by Harry Norris, is a vast three storey house built in the Dandenongs in 1930-33 for the "Aspro King", Alfred N. Nicholas. One of the finest examples of the Art-Deco mansion in Australia, Norris' design sits uniquely at the midpoint between the decorative Zig-Zag Moderne style of the 1920's (commonly called the Jazz Style in Australia) and the Streamlined Moderne of the 1930s. "Burnham Beeches" also predates the so-called "1934 Revolution" of modern architecture in Melbourne, built four years before Norman Seabrook's MacRobertson Girls High School, 1934 and Geoffrey Mewton's Stooke House, Brighton, 1935 (demolished 1987).

Built at Sherbrooke on a sixty acre site amidst gardens designed by Hugh Linaker who laid out the parklands of the Shrine of Remembrance, "Burnham Beeches" was built in reinforced concrete and massed as if a huge ship with curving bays and long stretches of cantilevering decks, accessible from the major rooms on three levels and complete with a "bridge" at the top, containing an observation tower, flagpole, floodlights and radio set. Planned with baroque fluidity, the house contained a theatrette, "engine" and "motor" rooms, a passenger lift, and vast reception rooms including a lounge the size of a cinema foyer and bedrooms each with ensembles, dressing rooms, adjoining "sun" rooms and balconies. In describing the essence of the design, Norris said, "Our man wants fresh air, sunshine and outlook at command and under control. These then shall be the keystones of the building."

Rather than standing as Johnson would have it at the midpoint between traditional and modern, both in style and structure, between European and English trends in domestic architecture of the grand scale, "Burnham Beeches" illustrates Harry Norris' passion for America, in particular for the Streamlined Moderne of the United States, where the tendency was to associate the style symbolically with one specific machine, that of transportation, and in this case, the ocean liner. By contrast, the ornament is uncompromisingly jazz. Bold zig-zagging chevrons of the iron balustrade encircle the house at each level. Strong horizontal course lines incised into the stuccoed facade are punctuated by diamond motifs containing representations of Australian animals.

Overseas examples comparable to "Burnham Beeches" fall into two groups; the formalizing stripped classicism of English houses such as the House at Newbury, Berkshire by Thomas S. Tait of Sir John Burnet and Partners, 1928 and the curvilinear free planning of the Streamlined Moderne of the United States, exemplified by the Norman Bel Geddes house designs for the *Ladies Home Journal*, 1931 and the Butler House, Des Moines, Iowa by Kraetsch and Kraetsch, 1936. Neither example serves completely to classify "Burnham Beeches" which uniquely combines



Burnham Beeches - built on Aspirin.

elements of both tendencies. Few Australian examples with the exception of Art Deco apartment blocks in Melbourne and Sydney come close to the elaborate scale of "Burnham Beeches", a rare achievement in the years of the Depression. A House at Bayview, N.S.W. by W. Watson Sharp, 1940 is one of the few comparable examples.

Norris' business relationship with Alfred Nicholas arose through a common interest in tennis. Norris became the official architect for the Nicholas Group of companies, and designed the Nicholas Building, Swanton St., Melbourne, 1926 followed by Burnham Beeches 1930-33 and various laboratories and production plants for

Nicholas and Aspro. Norris' other significant works in Melbourne include Kellow House, St. Kilda Road, 1929; Capital Bakeries, cnr. Toorak Road and Chapel Street, South Yarra, 1929; Coles No.4 Store, 301 Bourke Street, 1929; Melford Motors, Elizabeth Street, 1929; Majorca Building, cnr. Flinders Lane and Centre Place, 1931; Wesley College, St Kilda Road, Prahran, 1934; Foy and Gibson's Store, cnr. Bourke and Swanston Streets, 1934-5; and Mitchell House, cnr. Elizabeth and Lonsdale Streets, 1938.

Burnham Beeches is now operating as a country hotel. For reservations or inquiries, phone 755 1903.

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