



Zoie Bennett-Fryer

(*The West Australian*, 6 May 1938, p.7)

Zoie Tijou Bennett (1911-1985) was born 25 July 1911 in Claremont WA, the only child of Tamworth, NSW-born surveyor Athol John Bennett, and Jessie M. Fitch, who had married at the Presbyterian Church, Claremont in December 1909. Zoie was educated at Perth College, and afterwards at Kobeelya, Katanning, where she was dux in 1927. Zoie's first architectural mentor was Alfred R.L. Wright. Perhaps more open-minded than some of his confreres, Wright had in Perth during 1919 stated that there were female members of the profession in other States and countries [but not in WA], and noted: 'The selfish and exploded notion that they would be intruding in a man's domain may be put to one side'. Articled to Wright for three years, Zoie attended classes at Perth Technical College and the University of Western Australia. Perhaps with some guidance from Wright, in 1931 she won a prize for an £1 800 house design in the 'Ideal Homes' competition. At the completion of her articles, Bennett was for six months assistant to Karl M. Forster, before leaving to study for the Architects' Board of WA examinations.

In November 1933 *The West Australian* newspaper announced the results of the ninth annual examination conducted by the Architects Board. Under the heading 'Architects' Examinations - Female Candidate's Success', it was noted that of five candidates, three had passed. Zoie Bennett, A.B. Kreitmayer, and George A. Rowe were then entitled to have their names enrolled as registered architects under the *Architects Act of 1921*. Bennett was feted as 'one of the few candidates who have passed the whole examination at one time', and she duly registered in December 1933, number 142. Zoie was only the fourth female architect registered in WA, following Margaret Pitt Morison (Oct 1924,

no.102 & Aug 1929, no.129), Nancy Allen (Dec 1932, no.138), and Dorothea Hancock (Dec 1932, no.139); and in 1934 became the first female member of the Royal Western Australian Institute of Architects.

In the early 1930s Zoie was living with her parents at 34 Charles Street, South Perth and enjoying social events such as the “T-Square Ball”, organised by the architectural students of Perth. Zoie moved to Sydney for 1935, undertaking further architectural studies at the Technical School whilst working in the office of Crane & Scott, where she learned a great deal about the design of residential flats. At the end of the same year she returned to WA, and accepted an appointment with the Workers’ Homes Board (WAWHB), formed in 1912. The female architects in Perth held a very strong bond within the overwhelmingly male-dominated profession of the time, and in July 1936 Zoie joined Morison and Allen at a luncheon to welcome visiting Melbourne architect Ellison Harvie, hospital design specialist and a leader in her field.

Sadly, in April 1939 Zoie and many others from the profession attended the funeral of Alfred Wright, her mentor and Architects’ Board chair, at Karrakatta. She left Perth in 1941 to make a new home in Victoria, with Margaret Feilman (fifth female registered in WA, 1945, no.176) promoted to being in charge of the drawing office at the WAWHB. Bennett worked as an architect at the Allied Works Council, and in July 1941 married John Edmund (Tubby) Fryer at the Gardiner Church in Melbourne. Originally from Nedlands, Fryer died serving in the RAAF during August 1943. He is remembered at the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede in Surrey, UK which commemorates the names of over 20,000 airmen lost in the Second World War, and who have no known graves. After the death of her husband, Bennett joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force at Perth, then chosen out of 24 women for commissioned rank and for special duties, gaining the second highest marks in Australia. The largest of the Second World War women's services, the WAAAF was formed in March 1941 after considerable lobbying by women keen to serve. Following her war service, Zoie returned to work for the Workers’ Homes Board.

The post-war period brought about a massive population increase in Australia due to large intakes of European migrants and a baby boom. Housing quickly became a priority which led to the Commonwealth introducing its first national

housing scheme, the Commonwealth Housing Agreement. The agreement provided the Workers' Homes Board with funding to build 20,000 homes in ten years – accounting for 41% of housing built in WA at the time. In 1947 the Board was rebranded as the State Housing Commission (SHC), with the requirements of the Commission increasing threefold following the war.

In 1947, a Royal Commission was ordered into housing, following allegations of “improper practices in the granting of building permits and allocation of houses.” These allegations came during a time when the SHC was responsible for allocating permits under the Building Operations and Materials Control Act, which had been put in place after the War to ration building supplies. With the demand for housing outstripping the supply of building materials, some Commission employees were offered bribes and other incentives to approve building permits or release building materials.

Caught up in a wide-ranging investigation, in January 1948 Zoie Fryer, known to other staff at the SHC as Miss Bennett, was interviewed and asked about private work, explaining that it was undertaken at her own home and outside of business hours. Zoie also pointed out that she had done overtime work for the SHC in the office and at her own home, without extra payment! By 1949, she was living in a flat in Burt Way, East Perth and working within an incredibly busy office. Further research into SHC records could reveal further information on her work and contributions within the organisation.

In the 1950s Zoie moved to Victoria again, and at some stage commenced work with the large Melbourne firm of Bates Smart & McCutcheon. She registered with the Architects Board of Victoria in 1957, and resigned from the register of architects in WA on 30 December 1960. By 1963 she was living at 28 Cohuna Street, Brunswick in Melbourne. In 1967, she took a position in Brisbane with the Department of Housing, working there until retirement, possibly triggered by Public Service age limits. Electoral rolls indicate that she was at Buderim, Queensland in 1972, and at 11 Lavarack Crescent, Buderim in 1980. Zoie passed away at Buderim on 27 October 1985, aged 74 years.

With the disruption of the Second World War slowing the potential studies of both men and women, just six females were registered as architects in Western Australia in the first half of the Twentieth Century, with Marie Therese Jackson

being registrant no. 200 in February 1949. Interestingly, Zoie Bennett-Fryer is perhaps less-recognised than Margaret Pitt Morison, Nancy Allen, and Margaret Feilman as a pioneering female in the previously male-dominated profession of the Inter-War period. This is mainly due to the fact that her work occurred in a number of Australian States. Contemporary reports indicated that Zoie was extremely intelligent and resourceful, a notable architect whose contributions, particularly in the field of housing, remain to be researched in depth.

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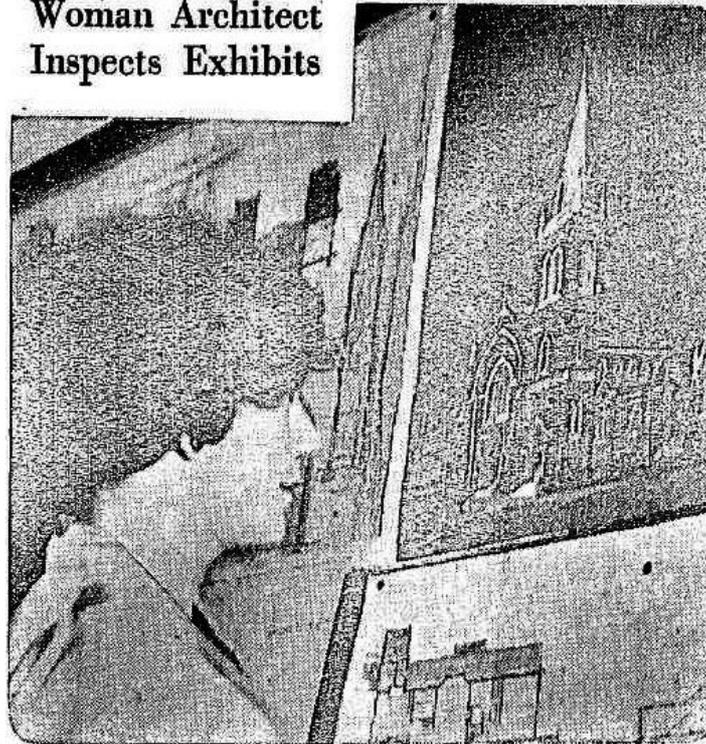
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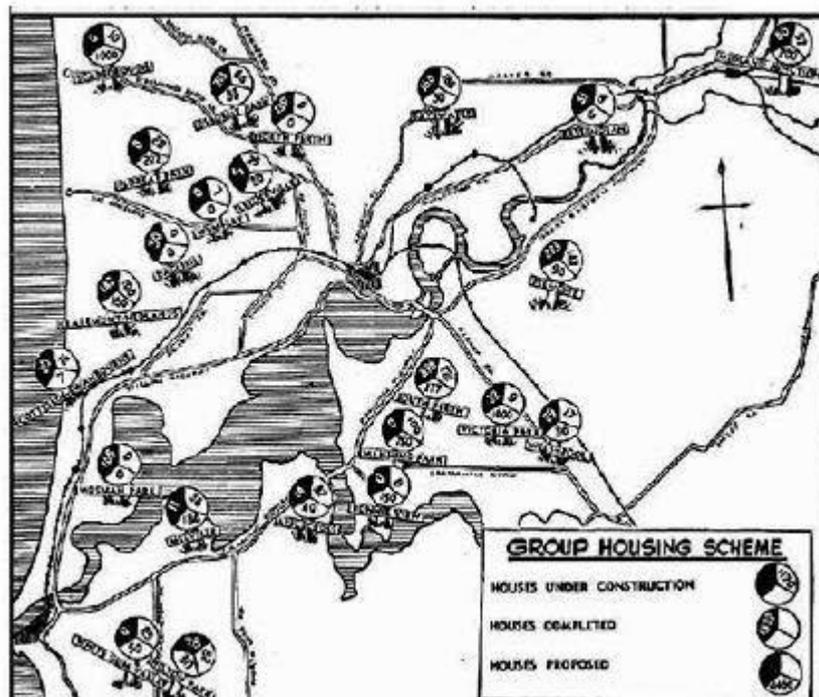
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Woman Architect Inspects Exhibits



Miss Zoie T. Bennett, A.R.I.A., inspects a drawing of the Subiaco Roman Catholic Church by Mr. E. Henderson, F.R.I.A. The drawing is one in the Architectural Exhibition at Burt Memorial Hall.

Zoie Bennett viewing a drawing of St Joseph's Church, Subiaco by E. Le B. Henderson in 1934
(*Daily News*, 24 May 1934, p.5).



A 1949 map of the main metropolitan areas of Perth in which the State Housing Commission had built and was building group homes, many of which reflect the efforts of Zoie Bennett-Fryer
(http://www.dhw.wa.gov.au/HousingDocuments/Centenary_Post-war%20housing%20crisis%20sparks%20Royal%20Commission.pdf)