



Margaret Pitt Morison

(*The West Australian*, 17 May 1929, p.6; *The Western Mail*, 9 April 1936, p.28)

Margaret Lillian Pitt Morison (1900-1985) was born 3 December 1900 at *Morrison*, 18 Cecil Street, off Lincoln Street, North Perth, child of George Pitt Morison and Frances Margaret nee Somner, who had married in 1899. The Pitt portion of the name came from George's mother's side. George was born in Victoria, but when he first arrived in Western Australia after having studied art in France and Spain, obtained employment as a draftsman at the Lands Department. In line with his vocational aspirations, George was appointed an assistant-director at the Art Gallery, Perth in 1906 and from 1915-1942 was curator of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Margaret's younger brothers, Donald Somner Morison and Bernard Seton Morison were born in 1903 and 1906, and did not adopt the use of the Pitt portion of their father's name.

Margaret was educated at the Girls' High School, overlooking the Swan River at Claremont (the school moved and become St Hilda's, Mosman Park in 1930) and Perth Modern School. Unable to pursue her early interest in medicine as there was no medical school in Perth, Margaret began working as a secretary for Professor Hubert Whitfield at the University of Western Australia, until Reginald Summerhayes suggested she consider architecture. She became articled to Reg's father Edwin, although it took considerable persuasion by her father for Morison to be accepted as a student. She said 'it wasn't conceived that a girl would want to take up architecture' in those days.

In April 1920 Margaret Morison began her articles with Edwin Summerhayes, eventually completing her training with the firm of Eales & Cohen. Western Australia's first female architect, Morison registered in October 1924 (no.102) and in October 1925 left for the Eastern States with her parents, 'intending to enlarge her architectural experience'. She worked for a number of practices after moving to Melbourne, including the firm of Cedric Ballantyne, a reasonably large Melbourne practice. She studied at the University of Melbourne's Architectural Atelier, 'modelled on the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris', and late in 1926 joined the office of the prominent firm A. & K. Henderson.

Planning to return to Melbourne when possible, for family reasons Morison returned to her parents' home at 6 Fraser Street Swanbourne in 1929, telling the *West Australian* in May of that year that things had improved for women seeking a career in architecture: "She has not so many things to work against, and the old prejudices are gradually disappearing. In Melbourne, at least, it is being recognised that there is a place for a woman in a drawing office, and that she can do a man's work." Margaret provided her resignation to the Architects Board in 1926, re-registering in August 1929 (no.129), soon followed by other female architects Nancy Allen (December 1932, no.138), Dorothea Hancock (December 1932, no.139), and Zoie Bennett (December 1933, no.142).

Leighton Irwin, Director of the Atelier, gave Morison a letter of introduction to F.G.B. Hawkins, who had moved from Melbourne to Perth in 1929. For the next two years Margaret was employed by Hawkins, her work including documenting the design of the Atlas Assurance Co Office. During the Depression she was retrenched and worked as a housekeeper for her brother Donald and his family at Doodlakine, whilst her sister-in-law was undergoing medical treatment. Margaret then joined the Poster Studios, a small commercial art business established by other out-of-work architects Harold Krantz, John Oldham and Colin Ednie-Brown. Despite hard times the business was successful, employing up to twenty architects and artists. In both 1931 and 1933 Margaret prizes in the 'Ideal Homes' competition, and in 1934 she began to work with Krantz on the design of the Myola Club in Claremont. Over the next few years she worked predominantly for Oldham, Boas & Ednie-Brown on the Adelphi Hotel, Karrakatta Club and Emu Brewery.

The few female architects in Perth during the 1930s held a very strong bond within the overwhelmingly male-dominated profession of the time, and in July 1936 Morison joined Zoie Bennett and Nancy Allen at a luncheon to welcome visiting Melbourne architect Ellison Harvie, hospital design specialist and a leader in her field. The luncheon was probably instigated by Morison, who had recently holidayed in the Eastern States and had previously known Harvie from her time at the Atelier. By this time Dorothea Hancock had moved to England.

Morison and Harold Krantz as associate architects advertised tenders in May 1938 for a residence on the Esplanade at South Perth. While working with Krantz, Margaret met architect Heimann Jacobsohn (1899-?), a Polish-born Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany who came to Australia in 1937. Finding common ideals, about 1938 Morison set up a practice with Jacobsohn and they worked together until 1942, producing designs for speculative builders and private clients, including the Marginata Flats on the north-west corner of Goderich and Hill Streets in Perth. Naturalised in late 1942, Jacobsohn joined Australian forces in the Second World War, then practising and teaching in Brisbane after his discharge in 1944. Among the substantial homes Margaret designed during the war was one for her father and herself at 71 Hobbs Avenue Dalkeith - Frances had died in 1941. From 1942 Margaret worked on war-related projects in the Commonwealth Dept of Works and Allied Works Council.

She resigned her government position in protest after an injustice that reduced female salaries, and early in 1945 became Clerk of Works for Melbourne architect H. Vivian Taylor at the Australian Broadcasting Commission project in Perth. The project folded, and Morrison returned to Melbourne in September 1945 to continue working with Taylor. It appears that her father moved to his home State with Margaret and sadly, George died at South Yarra in September 1946. Post-war Melbourne was not as Morison remembered it, and she became dissatisfied in Taylor's office. She decided to return to Perth in April 1948 and within months, was appointed as a lecturer with the fledgling architecture course at Perth Technical College (PTC). By 1949, Morison was first year studio master, lecturer in history, civic design and fine arts.

In 1953 Margaret Morison stood as the Labor candidate for Nedlands in the State election, losing to the Liberals' Charles Court, later the State's Premier.

Despite the defeat, it was noted that a feature of the election in the conservative-dominated area was the heavy polling in favour of Morison. She remained at PTC until 1962, when she resigned after a colleague interfered with one of her subjects. From 1967 to 1971 she was assistant research officer in the planning department of the Perth City Council. During that period, Morison wrote a historical preface to a proposed statutory plan for Perth, which led to further historical work. Some brief periods of work during 1970 and 1971 in the School of Architecture at the University of Western Australia (UWA) led to her becoming a research officer on the State's architectural history at UWA. In 1979, just before her eightieth birthday, she produced *Western Towns and Buildings*, co-edited with John White, a comprehensive study of nineteenth and twentieth century Western Australian architecture. In the same year Margaret was made a Life Fellow of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects.

Margaret Pitt Morison died at Nedlands on 12 December 1985, aged 85 years, and her ashes were scattered to the winds at Pinnaroo Valley Memorial Park. Margaret's career spanned 65 years as practitioner, educator and historian. She is remembered with great fondness by UWA students of the 1970s and early 1980s for her kind, steady nature, and her willingness and generosity in sharing knowledge gained from many years of research in WA.

References:

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- 'Our Architecture', *The West Australian*, 2 April 1931, p.14 (Ideal Homes Competition).
- 'Ideal Homes – An Interesting Exhibition', *The West Australian*, 8 June 1933, p.18 (prize).
- 'Margaret Pitt-Morison', *Western Mail*, 9 April 1936, p.28 (holiday, Professional Womens Club).
- 'The Social Round', *Daily News*, 22 July 1936, p.8 (Ellison Harvey visit).
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Contributing author: John Taylor

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A group of students doing the 12 hours En loge project, Melbourne University Architectural Atelier 1927. The women pictured, from left to right, are Ellison Harvie, Margery Hill-Willis, Margaret Pitt Morison and Ilsa Williams (from *Bulletin of the MUA*, 1928, p.6 - reproduced in Willis & Hanna, *Women Architects in Australia 1900-1950*, p.18).



Marginata Flats on the north-west corner of Goderich and Hill Streets in Perth (Google 2013).