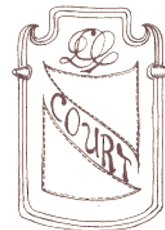
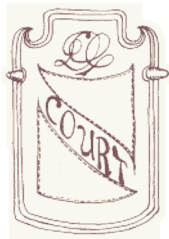


DODDINGTON COURT

160 VICTORIA EMBANKMENT, DURBAN

Philna Ferreira



In general style Doddington Court (1926) obviously relates to a number of "Courts" and "Mansions" in Durban, e.g. King's Mansions, Acutt Street, and South Beach Mansions, Prince Street. The fact that Doddington Court draws the eye of the observer more than its sister-buildings do is due mainly to two factors: firstly its situation — on the proud Esplanade; secondly its finish — brick honestly exposed. (And what delightful brickwork it is!)

Other related buildings have been plastered and painted. When I settled down to sketch Doddington Court from across the Esplanade, it came as a complete surprise to find the facade was almost absolutely symmetrical — a single exception being the top right-hand balcony which had apparently been closed in by an additional window. The illusion of asymmetry is probably to some extent due to the diversity of detail, but above all to its oblique positioning, as if it had been forced to fit in between the formidable Willern Court and the drum of Gainsborough Court, although in fact both its neighbours are more recent, 1938 and 1929 respectively. Possibly it was initially intended to face both Broad Street and Victoria Embankment from a corner site it considered all its own. Neither pedestrian nor passenger would therefore in passing get a full frontal view of it.

"Shorthand" sketch to indicate position between Gainsborough Court and Willern Court and the three-dimensional qualities of the façade, obvious when viewed from directly across the Esplanade.

SKETCH: Philna Ferreira.



The brick and tile structure of Doddington Court reminds one of the domestic architecture of people like Philip Webb (1831–1915), Norman Shaw (1831–1912), Charles Annesley Voysey (1857–1941) and Edwin Lutyens (1869–1944), in England — which confirms my contention that often styles from overseas took approximately three decades to gain currency in our country. In their famous country houses — and in Doddington Court — the over-all impression is one of mass rather than space; and if of space, then of space contained.

Functionally a house was still looked upon as a private and protective entity. The open plan, the idea of integrating inside with outside, was only advocated later, notably by Frank Lloyd Wright (1869–1959), e.g. in his desert dwelling and prairie houses. The closed doors and the steps disappearing in the dark confront the visitor/intruder and command respect for the privacy and security of the inmates. Untraditionally the central main entrance is neither augmented by height nor emphasised by width, nor is it accentuated by any other means. It is a plain archway giving access to a flight of stairs. The rhythm of the semi-circular stilted arches in the ground floor is absolutely regular. The two arches on either side span the entrance to lock-up garages. What an exceptional thing — to have a lock-up garage in an apartment house! (This feature has led a Property News reporter to conjecture that the building might originally have been intended to accommodate a fire brigade.)

The sense of privacy is heightened when one hesitantly enters and finds — not public passages for hawkers and hucksters, but private doors leading off small carpeted landings. Seven severely shut doors and only seven little postboxes did I count. Tenants would not be anonymous. Outsiders would be conspicuous.

The next sensation is that of preciousness: the solid wainscoting in the dimly lit foyer; a tripartite bay-window with inviting nooks above a wooden window-sill at least 30 cm wide is the gem of the first floor landing; the window of the top landing, evidently intended to form a focal point, is the crowning glory of the house, the apex and the climax of the steep ascent. The decorative designs worked into both windows are elegant editions of Art Nouveau — a style that flourished briefly about the turn of the century (1890–1910) in revolt against eclecticism in all the arts. These windows reminded me of others I had noticed, at Durban Girls' College and at the boutique "Feathers" in Salisbury House, Durban.

An "antique" or "period" quality is lent to Doddington Court by the medallions with which the facade is studded, and by the arch-and-column components of the three upper balconies. Wall-crestring as a means of decoration dates back to the ancient Assyrians, e.g. in the Palace of Sargon at Khorsabad (722–705 B.C.); metal rosettes punctuated the vaults of the "Treasury of Atreus" in Mycenae (c.1325 B.C.). In Renaissance Italy glazed terra-cotta medallions were placed in the spandrels of arcades, e.g. on the Doges' Palace, Venice (1499–1550). This is the arrangement of the plaster medallions on Doddington Court. Arched window-openings divided by one or two columns have been a common feature of important buildings through the ages, the design of the arch often acting as a significant indication of a culture or a religion.

A delightful detail is the paving bordering on the municipal pavement. Its modest appeal lies in something natural between regular and irregular, something with a human touch, man-made.

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(Above sketches)

A sophisticated finishing touch: two metal plates left and right of the entrance to display its title. (The initials on the edifice appear to be the elegant signature of the anonymous architect.)

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