

AIA ACT CHAPTER: REGISTER OF SIGNIFICANT ARCHITECTURE

Draft prepared by Eric Martin AM

9 March 2023

NAME OF PLACE		EAST BLOCK	
Other/Former Names		Secretariat Building No. 1	
Address/Location		Cnr Kings Avenue and Queen Victoria Terrace, Parkes, ACT.	
Listing Status	Listed	Other Heritage Listings	Commonwealth Heritage List; DoF Heritage Register
		Level of Significance	
Date of Listing	1986	Category	
Citation	R033	Style	Inter-War Stripped Classical
Date of Design	1924	Designer/architect	JS Murdoch
Construction Period	1925 – 1926 and extensions in 1937 and 1943	Client/Owner	Department of Finance
Date of Additions	Numerous internal fit outs	Builder	

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE¹

East Block is a significant component of the Parliament House Secretariat group, which also includes West Block and the Provisional Parliament House. The group is located at the southern end of the Parliamentary Triangle and is an integral component of the significant Parliamentary Triangle landscape, exhibiting the skilful handling of planning and architectural forms within a simply designed landscape of related buildings, spaces and plantings. The group is an essential and important axial planning element within the Parliamentary Triangle. The planning principles of the group are as established by Walter Burley Griffin, and the architectural resolution of the group is as established within the office of John Smith Murdoch, Director of Works. (Criterion F1)

East Block is important for its association with Federation, as part of the Provisional Parliament House group, which formed the essential Government facilities in the early development of Canberra as the Nation's Capital. The Secretariat buildings are a remnant of the relocation phase of the Federal Capital when they represented the seat of Federal Government and political power. The former Secretariat buildings demonstrate a model of Government Administration dating from the earliest periods of developing the National Capital in the mid-1920s. East Block also accommodated the first Post Office for Canberra, servicing the City as well as the Parliament, and accommodated the first telephone exchange. (Criterion A4) Australian Historic Themes: 4.3, Developing Institutions, 7.4 Federating Australia.

The building was designed within the office of John Smith Murdoch and is a fine example of Inter-War Stripped Classical style. This is represented by the symmetrical planning and form, its classical proportions, the low horizontal massing, the simple but dignified detailing (such as cornices, balustrades, rainwater heads and paving) and its good appearance from all sides. (Criterion D2)

The building has associations with the relocation phase of the Federal Capital, the planning and architecture of John Smith Murdoch and Walter Burley Griffin, and the evolution of Federal Government administration in Canberra. (Criterion H1)

¹ Commonwealth Heritage List ID 105349 accessed 15 February 2022. https://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place_detail;search=state%3DACT%3Blist_code%3DCHL%3Blegal_status%3D35%3Bkeyword_PD%3D0%3Bkeyword_SS%3D0%3Bkeyword_PH%3D0;place_id=105349



The basement pneumatic tube for sending and receiving correspondence between East Block and Old Parliament House is of exceptional interest (Criterion F1).

BACKGROUND/HISTORY²

The Canberra Secretariat buildings and the Provisional Parliament house were the first buildings designed and erected in the Parliamentary Triangle of the new Federal Capital. Although Walter Burley Griffin's plan for buildings were for monumental structures in a landscape setting in the Beaux Arts style, the Federal Capital Advisory Committee favoured a more modest style, recommending that monumental works could come later in Australia's development. Thus the project for a provisional Parliament House was given to the Commonwealth architect John Smith Murdoch.

The East Block (Secretariat No 1) was constructed as a component of the complex of government buildings that featured the Parliament House as its centrepiece. The three buildings (East Block, Parliament House and West Block) articulate a classical symmetry centred on the land axis on which the Parliamentary Triangle is based. The proposal for the Secretariat scheme was first considered by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works in 1924. The proposal included a Secretariat Building at Canberra with provision for an Automatic Telephone Exchange and Post Office. This structure was referred to as Secretariat No 1. In evidence to the Committee, the total concept proposed two Secretariat buildings symmetrically disposed to the east and west of the land axis and to the rear of the provisional Parliament House. The centre block of Secretariat No 1 was to provide office accommodation for officials whose attendance at Canberra was essential by the time Parliament assembled. It was a proposal to provide provisional accommodation for a skeletal administration to serve Parliament, until the permanent Administration Building, which was then subject to an architectural design competition, could be built. The Post Office and the Telephone Exchange, to the north and south respectively of the centre block, were services essential to the function of a modern Parliament.

The East and West Block Buildings were designed by Murdoch to complement each other and for absolute balance in the landscape with the Provisional Parliament House.

From early 1925, with the construction of the Provisional Parliament House underway and the recommendation for the construction of the Secretariat Scheme agreed by Parliament, the move to Canberra began to gather momentum. In December 1925, plans were made for 960 staff to move into the building. Public welcomes were held for the new Public Service arrivals in Canberra and, because East Block was completed first, it is reasonable to suppose that transfers were organised so that it was occupied first. The Post Office and Telephone Exchange were operating in time for the arrival of the first wave of Departmental Officers. As Canberra's main post office, it had the post code 2600 and all distances to Canberra were measured from it.

The centre block, the area designed for Departmental office accommodation, was occupied by about eighty employees of the Department of Trade and Customs. Of special interest is the pneumatic tube system, installed in 1940, which assisted communications between East Block and Old Parliament House. From 1937-43 the Post Office in East Block was squared off by infill additions and, over the same period, additions to the west and to the south were made for the Telephone Exchange. Underground pneumatic tubes, were used to ferry correspondence back and forth between the Provisional Parliament House and East Block. (Remnants of these survive in the basement.)

By the 1950s the permanent Administration Building and the Treasury Building were constructed and East and West Blocks had expanded into their present form (with very minor exceptions mainly as the result of later internal alterations and the requirements of new technology). In 1963 the Prime Minister's Department moved into East Block and occupied the first floor. The Department of the Special Minister of State, created by the Whitlam Government, became the new occupants in 1973. Utilities and public spaces were upgraded in 1982. The air conditioning system was upgraded with a new smoke exhaust system and a new plant room located at the first floor of the original Telephone Exchange building. The centre block, the Telephone Exchange building and the offices built in 1937 were reroofed in metal decking. Other refurbishments occurred in the entry and office interiors. By 1994 East Block was under the administration of the Department of Arts and Administration Services.

² Department of Finance Heritage Register Citation NoDFD-61010



The former Post Office area was refurbished and opened in 1998 as the public area of the National Archives with a gallery for exhibitions. The refurbishment involved adaptation of the northern facade, including demolition of a 1950s addition, and the construction of ramps and disabled access. A section of pneumatic tube which connected the East Block to the provisional Parliament House has been retained to demonstrate the connection between the Secretariat Building and the former Parliament House.

The National Archives of Australia encourages public to use the building for access to the National Archives' collections.

DESIGNER/ARCHITECT

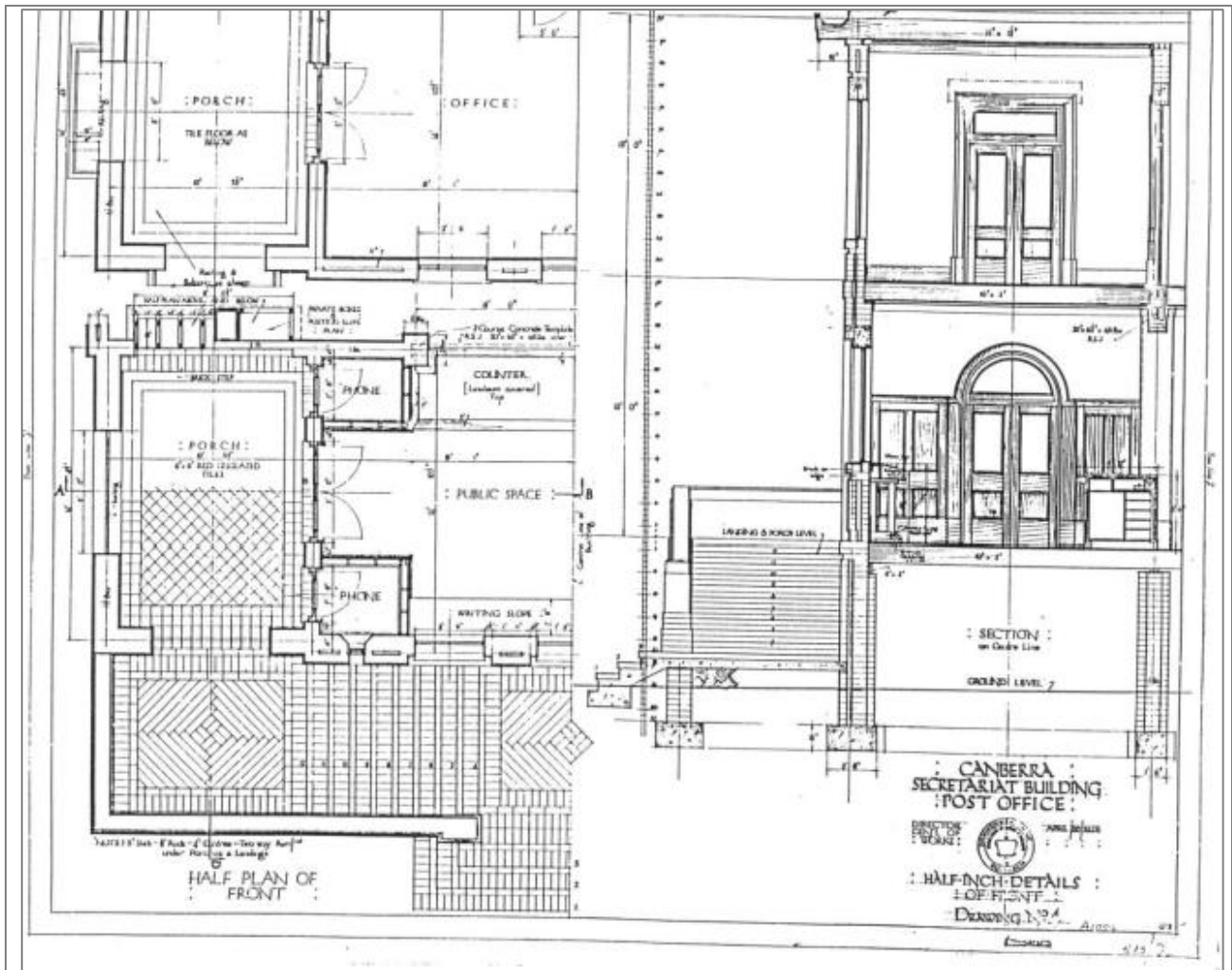
Office of John Smith Murdoch

PLANS



Figure 1

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

**Figure 2**

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

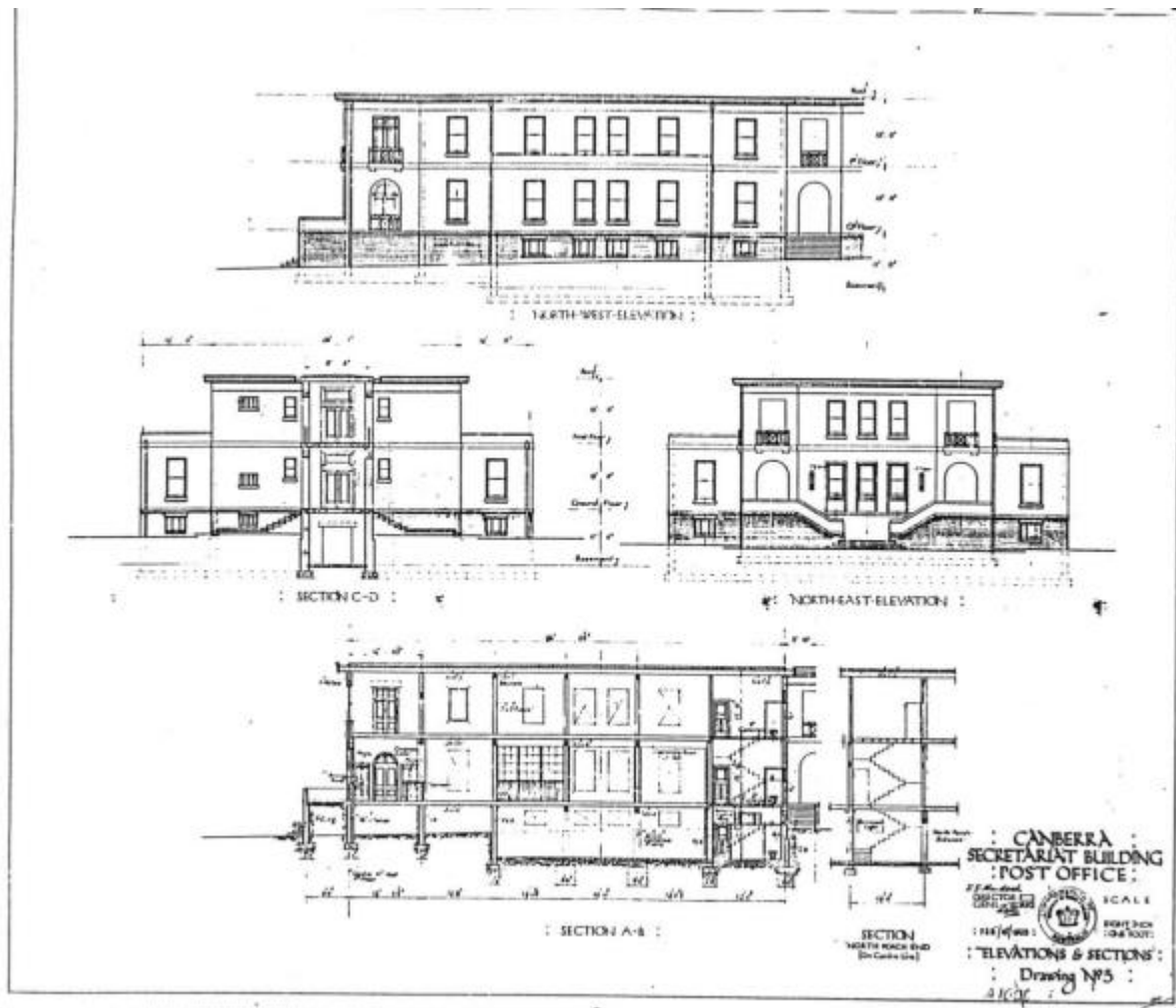


Figure 3

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

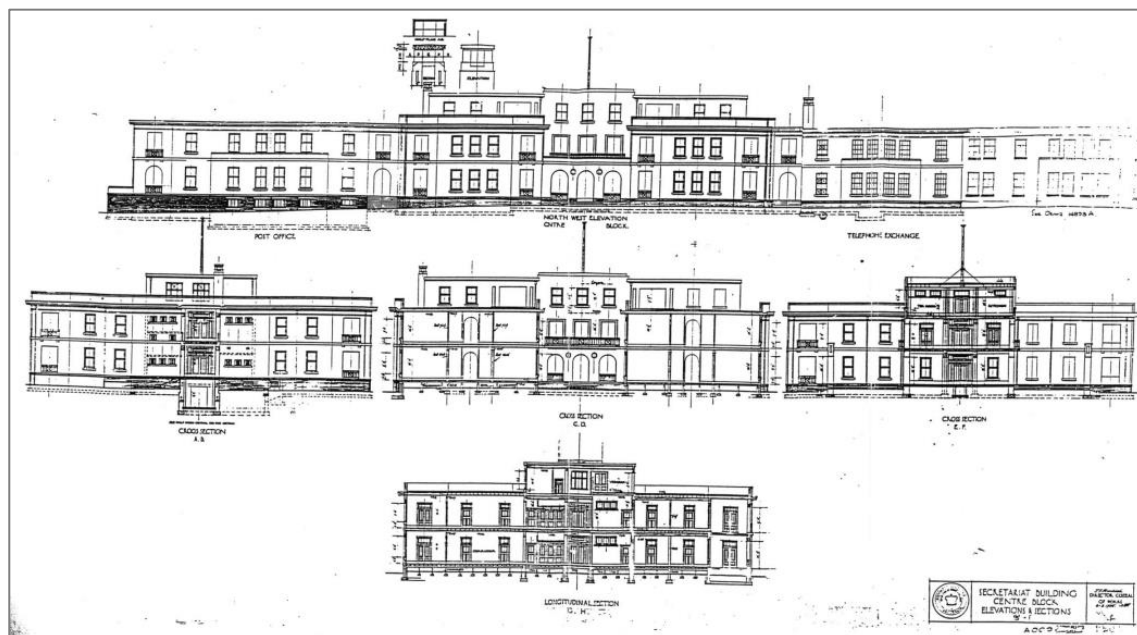


Figure 4

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



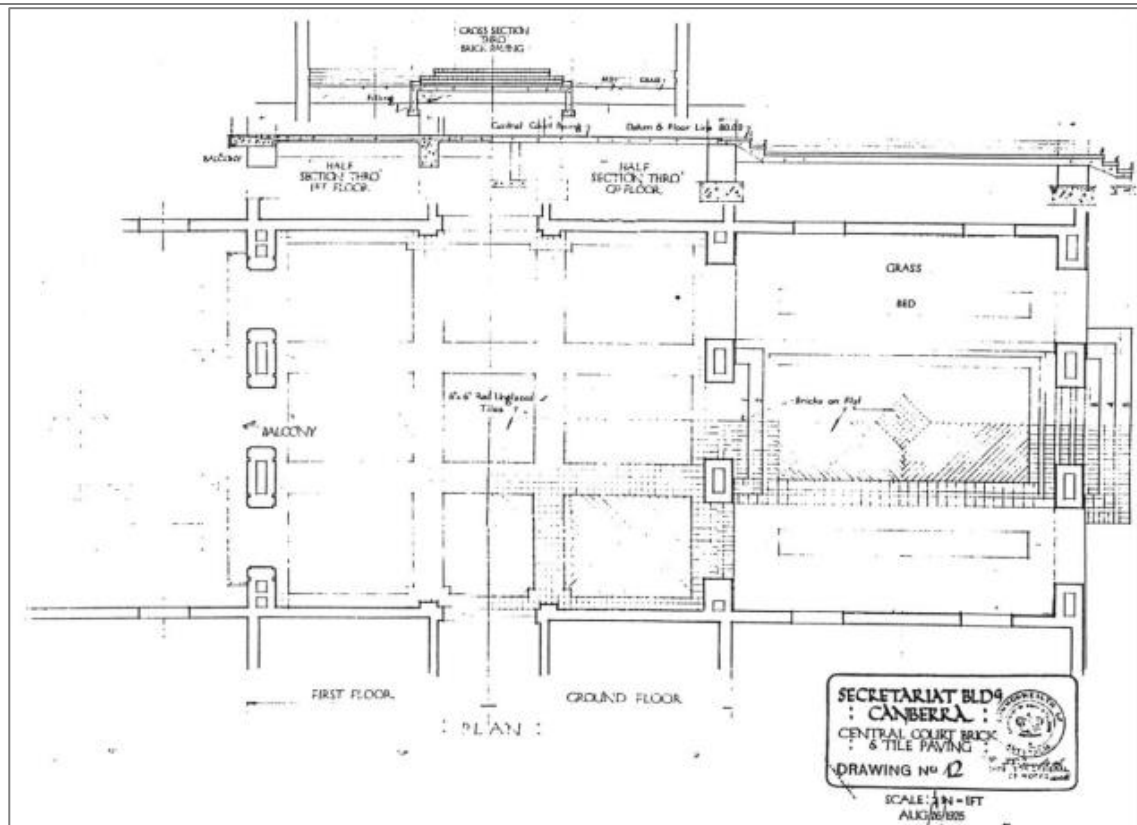


Figure 5

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

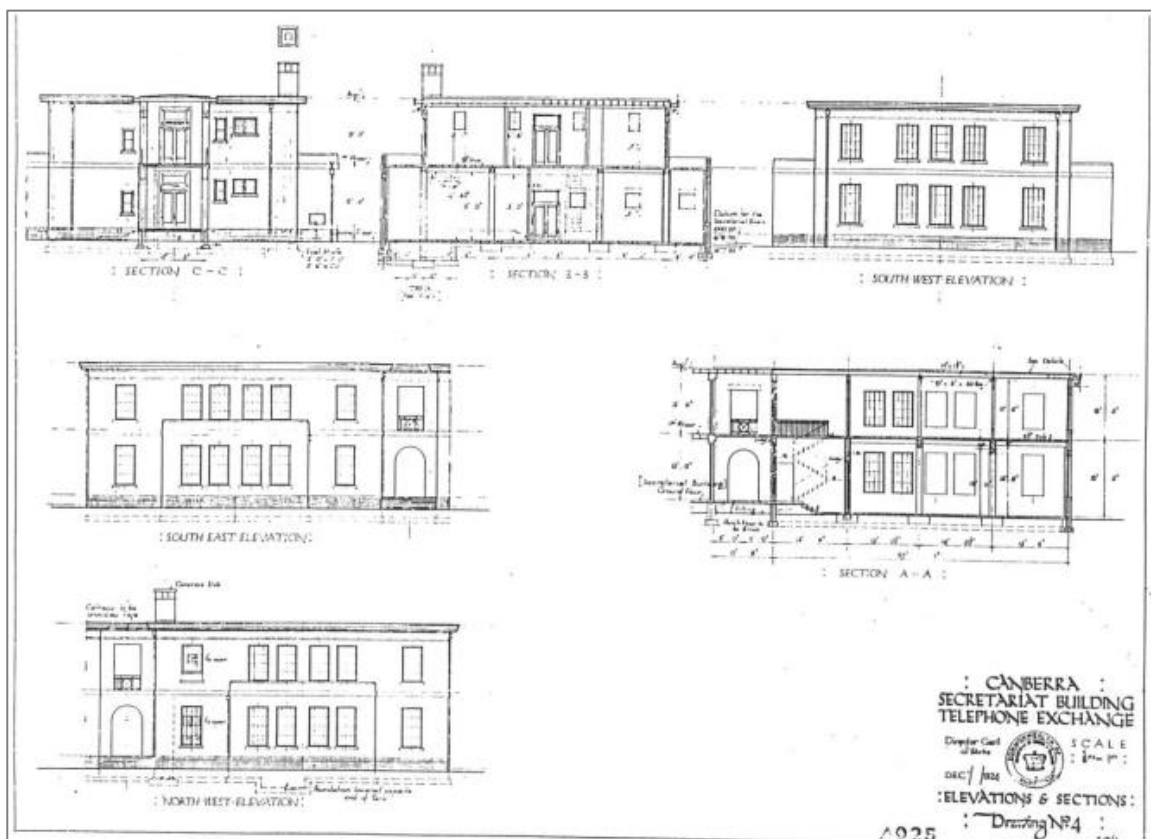


Figure 6

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

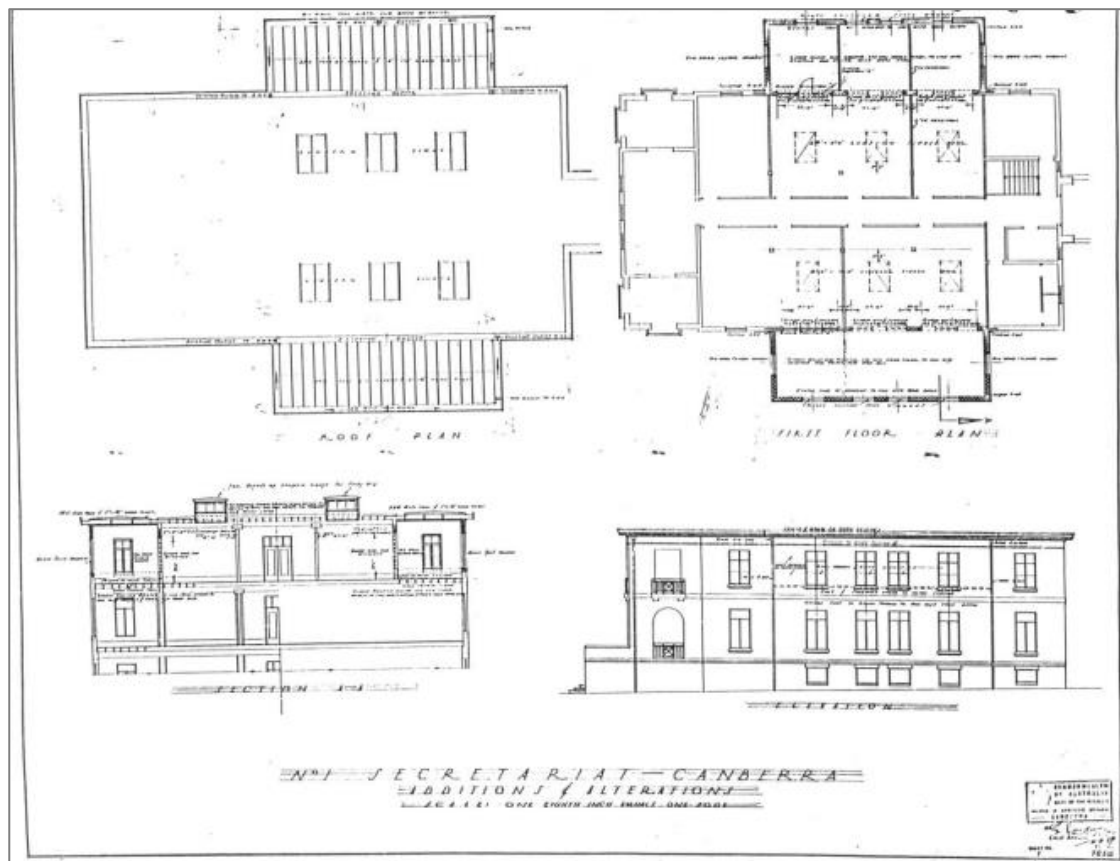


Figure 7

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

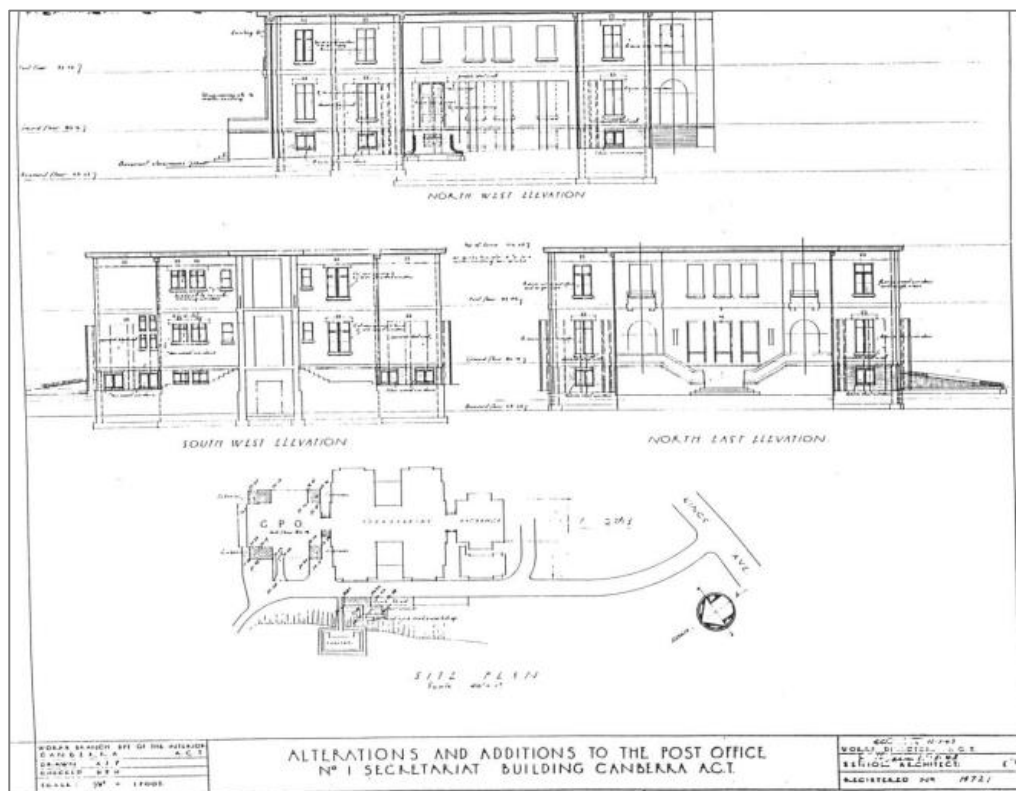


Figure 8

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



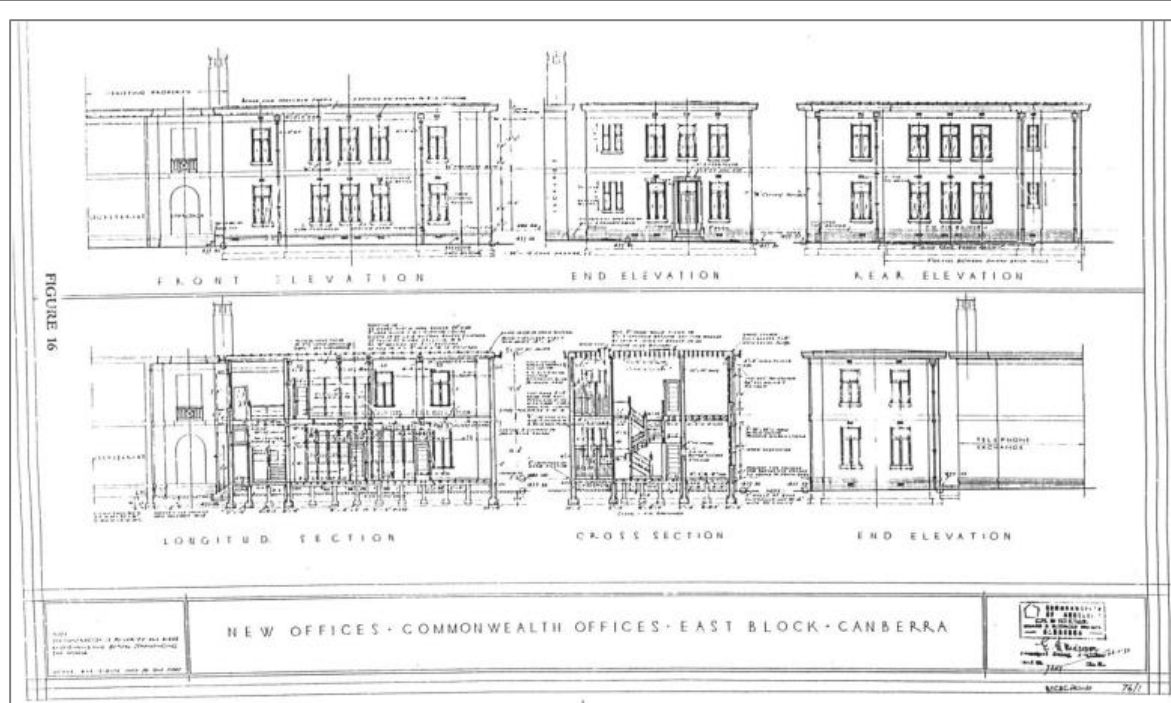


Figure 9

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

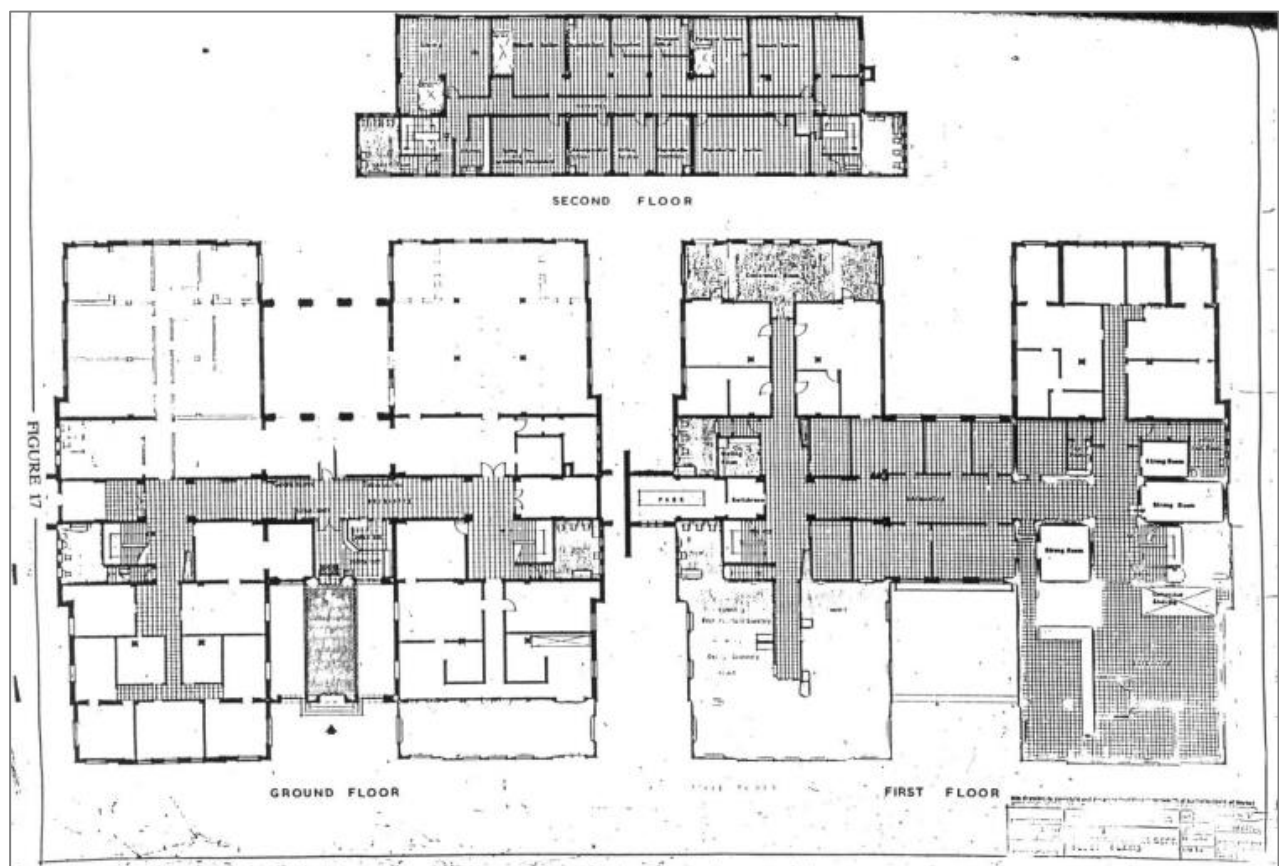


Figure 10

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

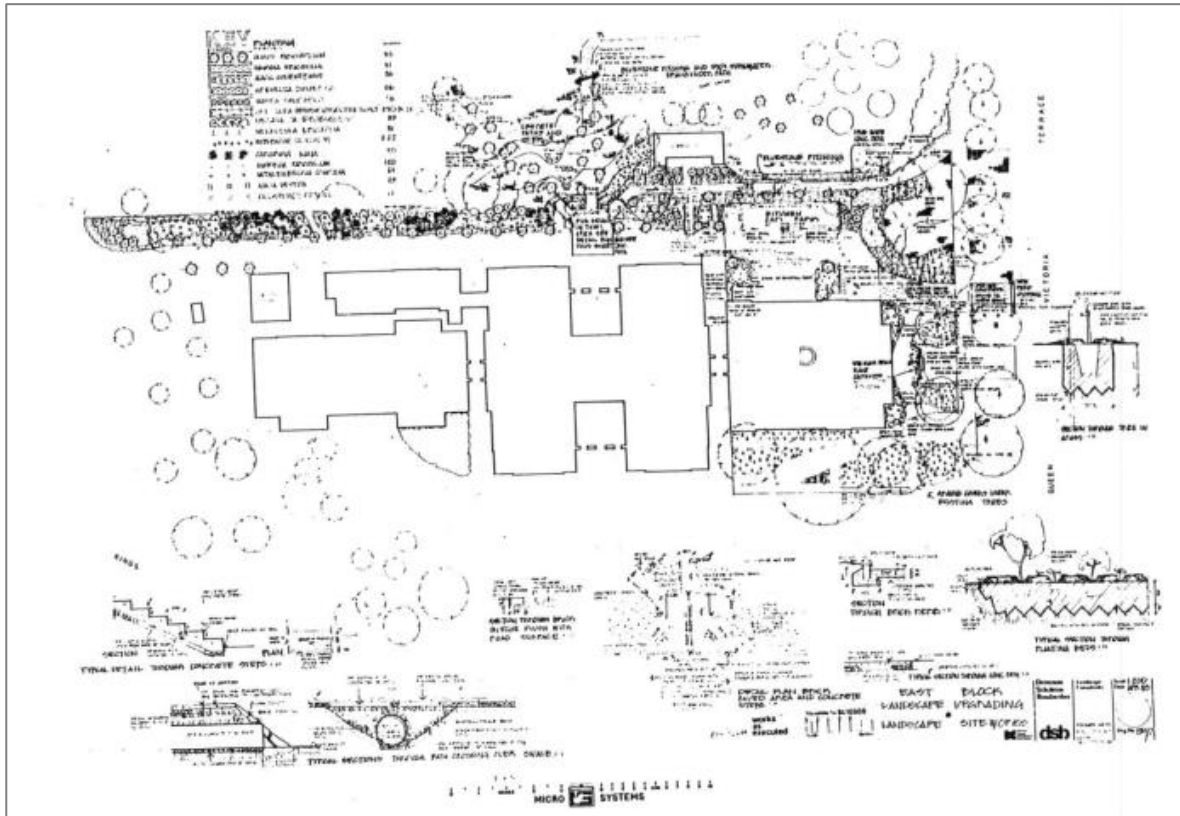


Figure 13

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 14: East Block

Source: National Archives of Australia



Figure 15: View from North East

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



Figure 16: View from North West

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

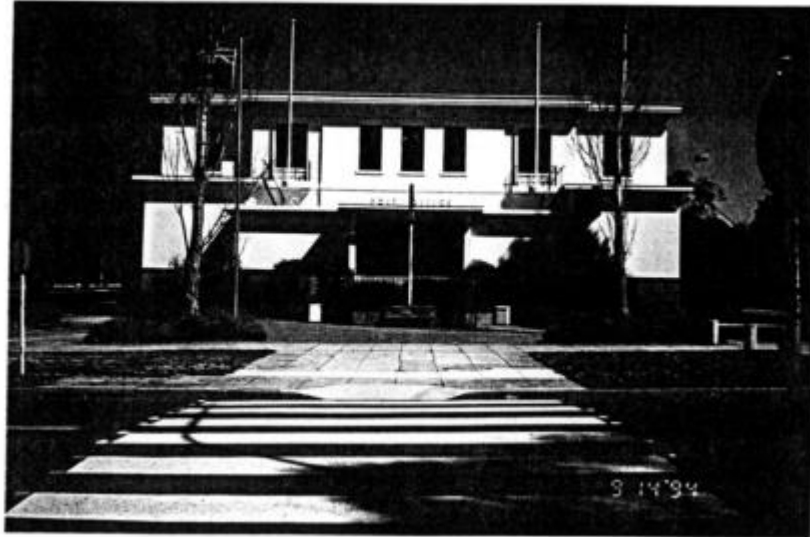


Figure 17: Post Office Entrance North Elevation

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



Figure 18: West Side

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



Figure 19: Side Loading Dock for Australia Post

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995



Figure 20: West Side Central Courtyard

Source: East Block Final Conservation Plan, 1995

CONDITION

Good. Post Office altered and rebuilt in 1950's

VALUES WHICH MEET COMMONWEALTH HERITAGE CRITERIA

Criterion A Process

East Block is important for its association with Federation, as part of the Provisional Parliament House Group, which formed the essential Government facilities in the early development of Canberra as the Nation's Capital. The Secretariat buildings are a remnant of the relocation phase of the Federal Capital when they represented the seat of Federal Government and political power. The former Secretariat buildings demonstrate a model of Government Administration dating from the earliest periods of developing the National Capital in the mid-1920s. East Block also accommodated the first Post Office for Canberra, servicing the City as well as the Parliament, and accommodated the first telephone exchange.

Attributes

All of the original form, fabric and appearance of the building.

Criterion D Characteristic Values

The building was designed within the office of John Smith Murdoch and is a fine example of Inter-War Stripped Classical style. This is represented by the symmetrical planning and form, its classical proportions, the low horizontal massing, the simple but dignified detailing (such as cornices, balustrades, rainwater heads and paving) and its good appearance from all sides.

Attributes

The building's Inter-War Stripped Classical style evidenced by the features noted above.

Criterion F Technical Achievement

East Block is a significant component of the Parliament House Secretariat group, which also includes West Block and the Provisional Parliament House. The group is located at the southern end of the Parliamentary Triangle and is an integral component of the significant Parliamentary Triangle landscape, exhibiting the skilful handling of planning and architectural forms within a simply designed landscape of related buildings, spaces and plantings. The group is an essential and important axial planning element within the Parliamentary Triangle. The planning principles of the group are as established by Walter Burley Griffin, and the architectural resolution of the group is as established within the office of John Smith Murdoch, Director of Works.

The basement pneumatic tube for sending and receiving correspondence between East Block and Old Parliament House is of exceptional interest.

Attributes

The building's location in relation to West Block, Old Parliament House and the Parliamentary Triangle. Also, remnants of the pneumatic tube system.

Criterion H Significant people

The building has associations with the relocation phase of the Federal Capital, the planning and architecture of John Smith Murdoch and Walter Burley Griffin, and the evolution of Federal Government administration in Canberra.

Attributes

The building's original architectural form and detail plus its relationship to West Block, Old Parliament House and the Parliamentary Triangle.

REFERENCES

Philip Cox, Richardson, Taylor & Partners, *East Block Final Conservation Plan*, 1995

