

AIA ACT CHAPTER: REGISTER OF SIGNIFICANT ARCHITECTURE

Draft prepared by Eric Martin AM

9 March 2023

NAME OF PLACE		WEST BLOCK AND THE DUGOUT	
Other/Former Names		Secretariat Building No. 2	
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	1987	Category	
Citation	R067	Style	Inter-War Stripped Classical, later known as Federal Capital architecture
Date of Design	1925	Designer/architect	John Smith Murdoch (1862-1945), Chief Architect of the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways
Construction Period	Its first three wings were completed by 1927, with a further wing added in 1944.	Client/Owner	Department of Finance
Date of Additions	Numerous internal fitouts	Builder	Under the direction of H.M. Rolland, Works Director, Canberra.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE¹

West Block is a significant component of the Parliament House Secretariat group, which also includes East Block and the Old 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 designed landscape of related buildings and spaces. The group forms essential and important axial planning elements with 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-General of Works. (Criterion F1).

West Block is important for its association with Federation, being 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 Secretariats are a remnant of the relocation phase of the Federal Capital when they

¹ Commonwealth Heritage List ID 105349 accessed 9 February 2023. 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=105428



formed the seat of Federal and political power. (Criterion A4) Australian Historic Themes: 4.3, Developing Institutions, 7.4 Federating Australia.

The building is a fine example of Inter-War Stripped Classical style. It exhibits classical style proportions and features of arcaded entrance screens and courtyard arrival points. (Criterion D2)

The unpretentious style of the building with its low horizontal massing, the role of the building as part of a group linked by architectural style and function, and the contribution of the building group as a feature of the designed landscape of the Parliamentary Triangle, are significant aesthetic qualities now greatly valued. (Criterion E1)

The group of government buildings is uncommon. Only one other similar formal grouping exists in Australia, and that is the Commonwealth and State offices group in Brisbane, also designed by John Smith Murdoch. (Criterion B2)

West Block has associations with the formative days of the National Library, 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)

The Dugout (now a substation) is significant as a purpose-built World War II bomb shelter. Along with West Block it is important for accommodating strategic international communication functions of Australia's war time activities. (Criterion 4) Australian Historic Themes 7.7 Defending Australia.

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 difficulty of establishing and housing government departments in Canberra was met by establishing a Secretariat of each Department on a temporary basis to assist the minister with Parliamentary work and to provide a link between that work and the general administration of Departments in Melbourne. It was therefore proposed that a special building, constructed of brick and harmonising with the Provisional Parliament House, be erected to accommodate these Secretariats and it was proposed that the Telephone Exchange and Post Office should be in one of the buildings. 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 1927 - 1929, Murdoch served as Director-General of Works, Public Works Branch, Department of Home Affairs.

West Block, Secretariat No. 2, was completed in 1928 near the southern apex of the Parliamentary Triangle under the control of H.M. Rolland, Works Director, Canberra. The completed building incorporated screened forecourts, verandahs, balconies and linking corridors. Block A was originally intended to house the National Library; Block B housed a strong room. Murdoch's building was modified and extended from an early date to suit the requirements of occupants.

In 1938 the balconies and corner verandahs were enclosed and brick spandrel panels inserted. In 1944, the building was occupied by Prime Ministers, Attorney Generals, Statistician, Treasury, Taxation, External, Affairs Territories, Auditor General and Crown Solicitor. In 1944 building was enlarged with the addition of a new south wing, Block D by Senior Architect J.Orwin, and enclosure of the central ground floor loggia in Block B. The corners of the new block were treated to match the enclosed balconies as executed in the 1938 alterations to the original building.

During World War II years, the small building to the east of West Block was constructed as a bomb shelter and called 'the Dugout'. It contained a Typex machine used for decoding cables and coding information to send in cables. This critical work was undertaken by the Prime Ministers Department, 5 Division which occupied the first floor of West Block. An external metal staircase was constructed to give access from a window on the first floor of West Block to ground level and The Dugout (Metcalf 2001)³.

² Department of Finance Heritage Register Citation NoDFD-61010

³ Metcalfe, Nancy and Ron (March 2001) Personal communication. Refer file note (RNE file 8/1/489).



In 1945/1946 the addition of telephone exchange and offices to B Block, creating enclosed, brick paved courtyards. Metal gates defined the new entrance portals. It appears that timber mouldings were removed from the windows at this time to modernise its appearance. In 1948, three storey extensions were added to the north wing, Block A.

The novel '*West Block: The Hidden World of Canberra's Mandarins*' written by Sara Dowse and published by Penguin Books in 1983⁴, is a fictional work set in West Block.

DESIGNER/ARCHITECT

John Smith Murdoch (1862-1945), Chief Architect of the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways.

PLANS

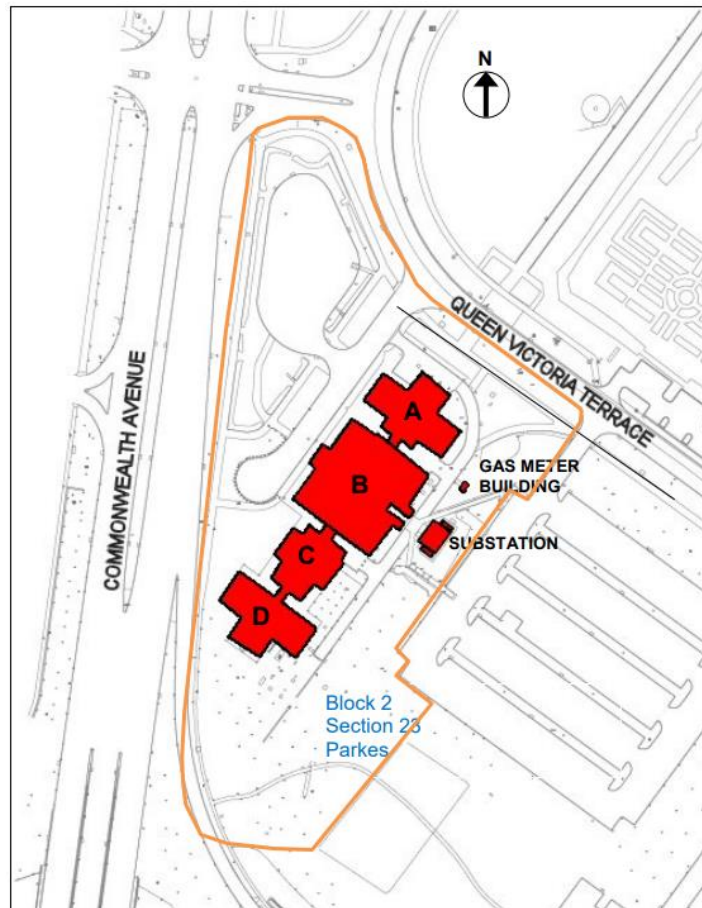


Figure 1: Site Plan

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, Based on Plan from 1994 CMP.

⁴ Dowse, S., *West Block: the hidden world of Canberra's Mandarins*, Penguin Books, 1983.



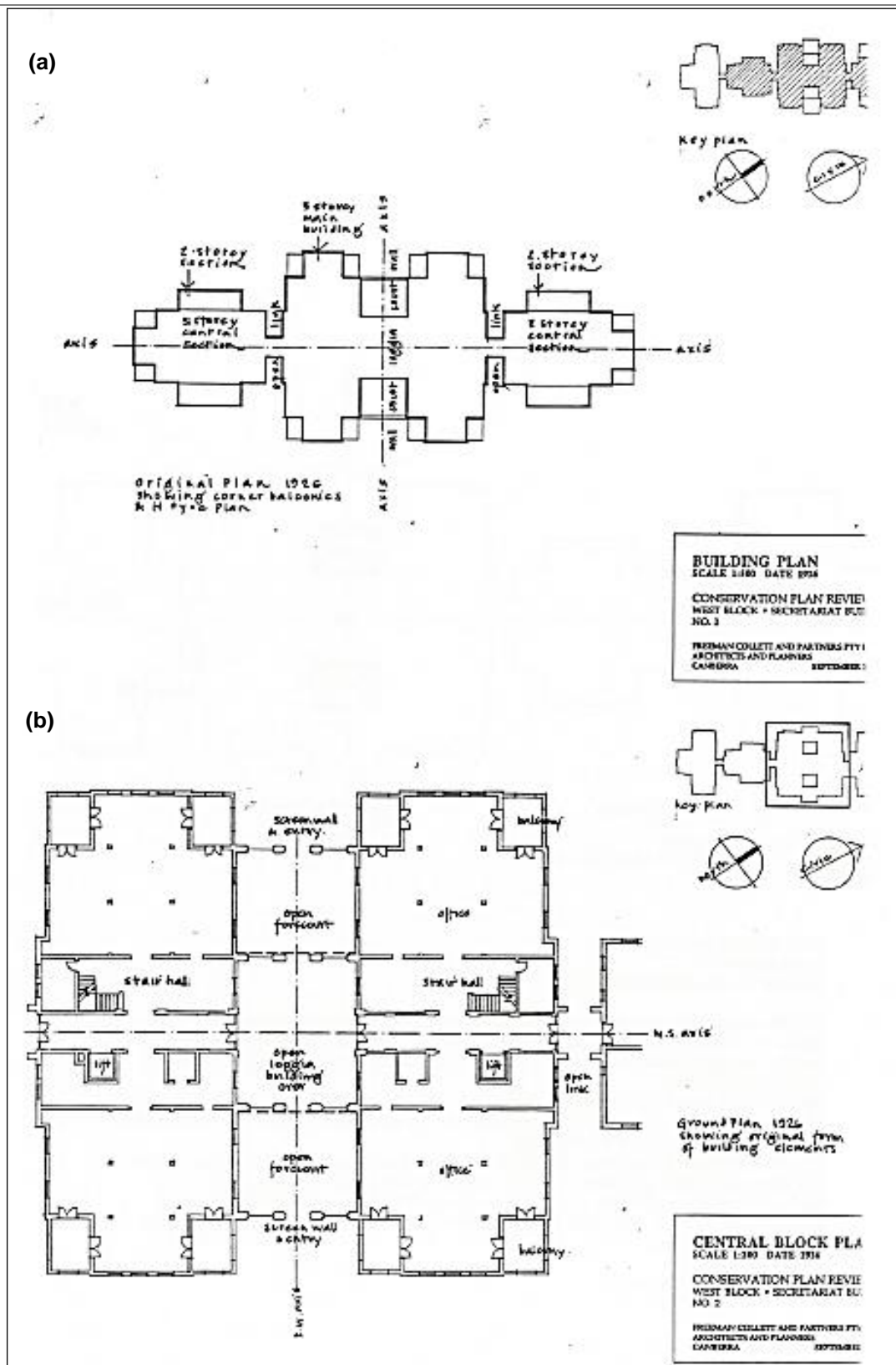


Figure 2: 1926 Plans: (a) Building Plan; (b) Central Block Plan

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

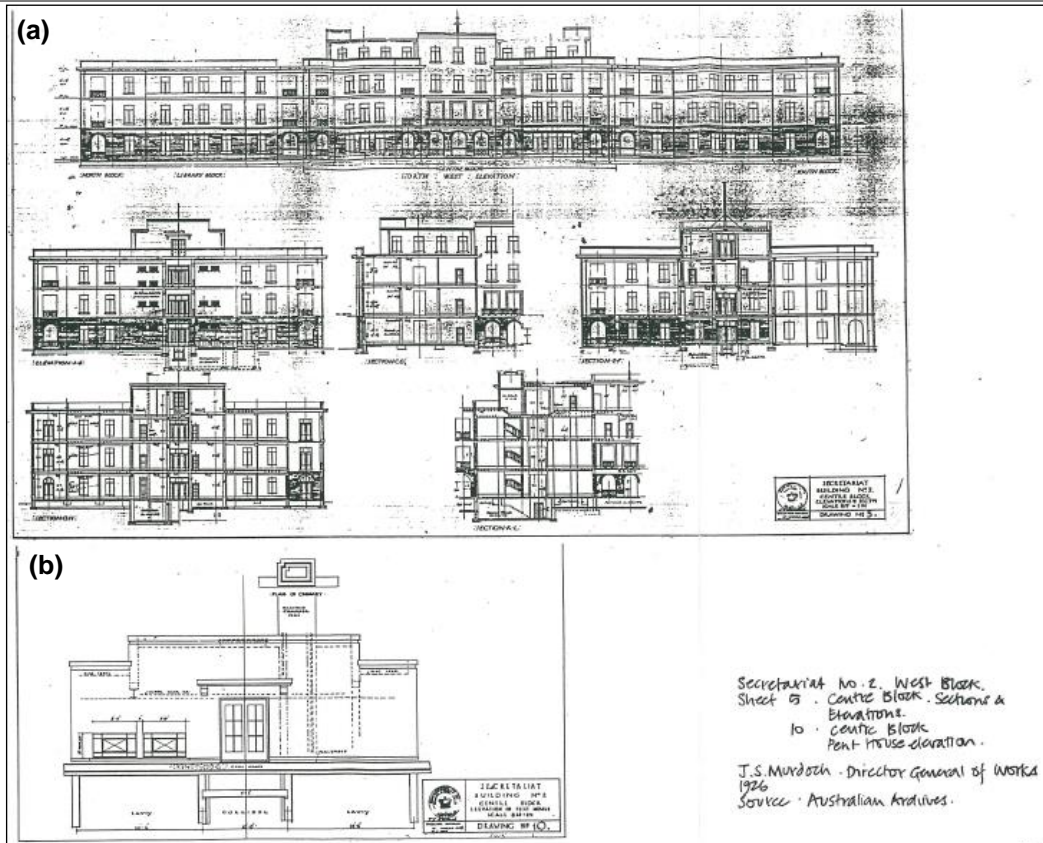


Figure 3: 1926 Elevations: (a) Central Block Section A Elevations; (b) Centre Block Pent House Elevation

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

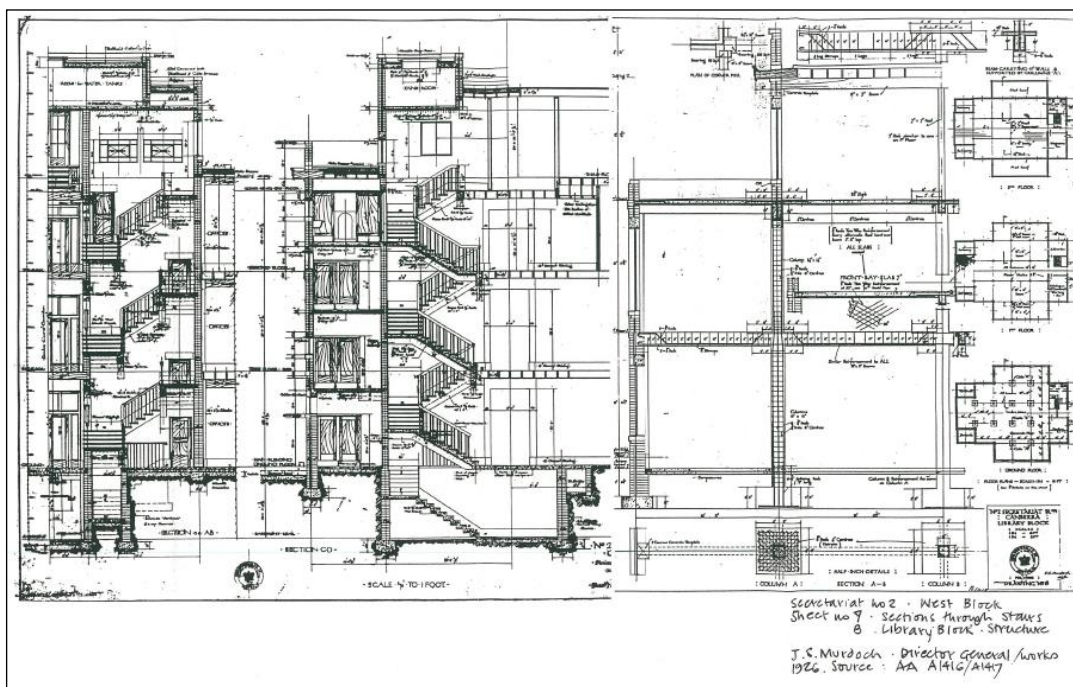


Figure 4: 1926 Sections – West Block

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan



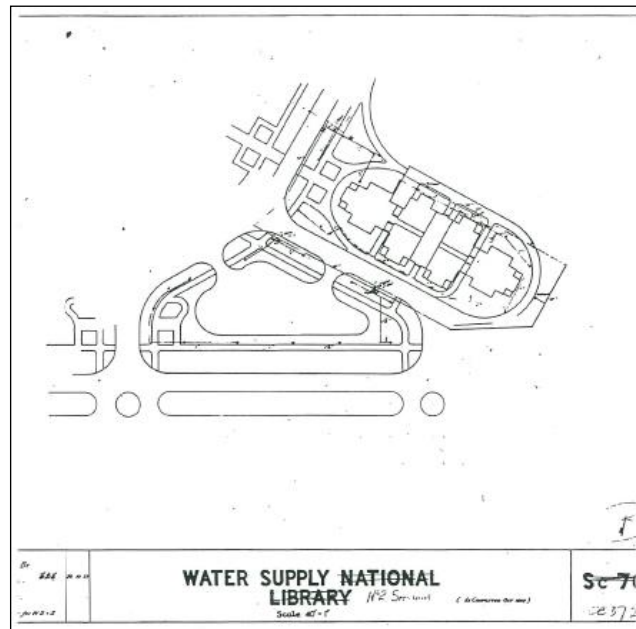


Figure 5: 1928 National Library Site Plan Water Supply
Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

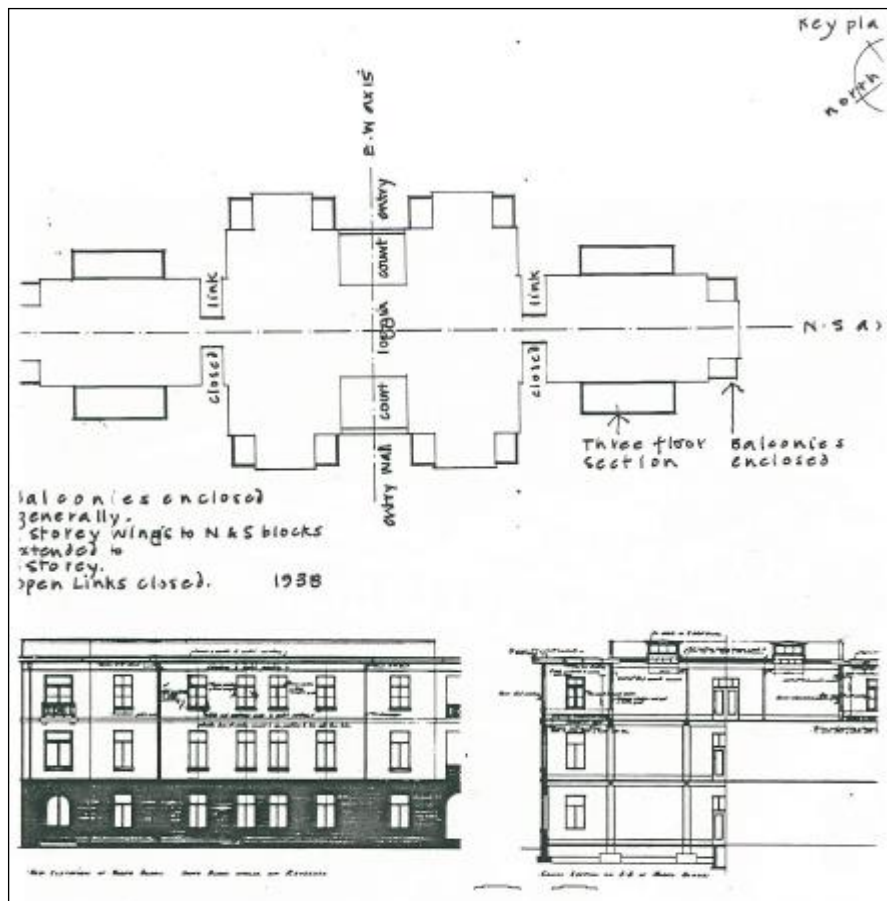
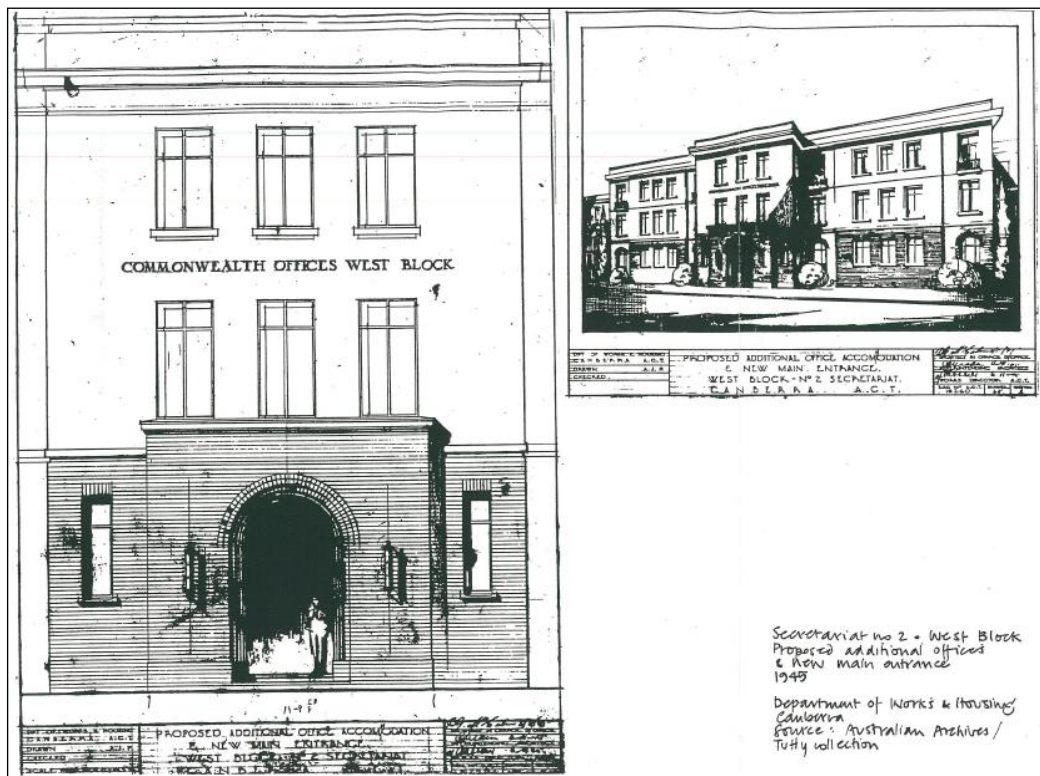
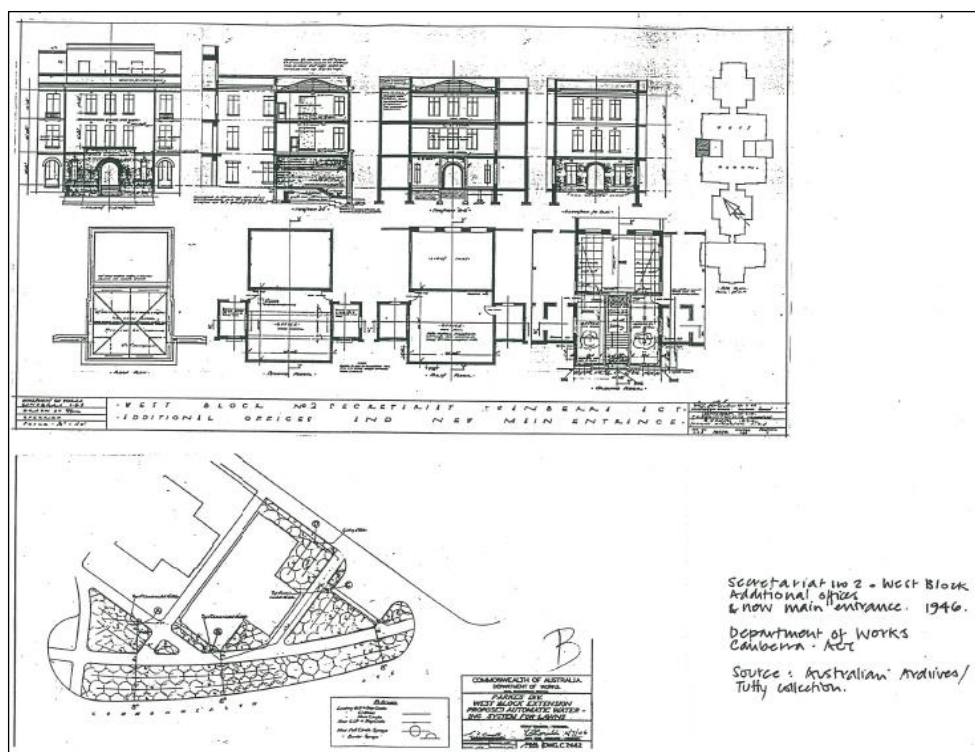


Figure 6: 1937-38 Changes - Elevations
Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

**Figure 7: 1945 Changes - Elevations**

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

**Figure 8: 1946 Changes - Elevations**

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

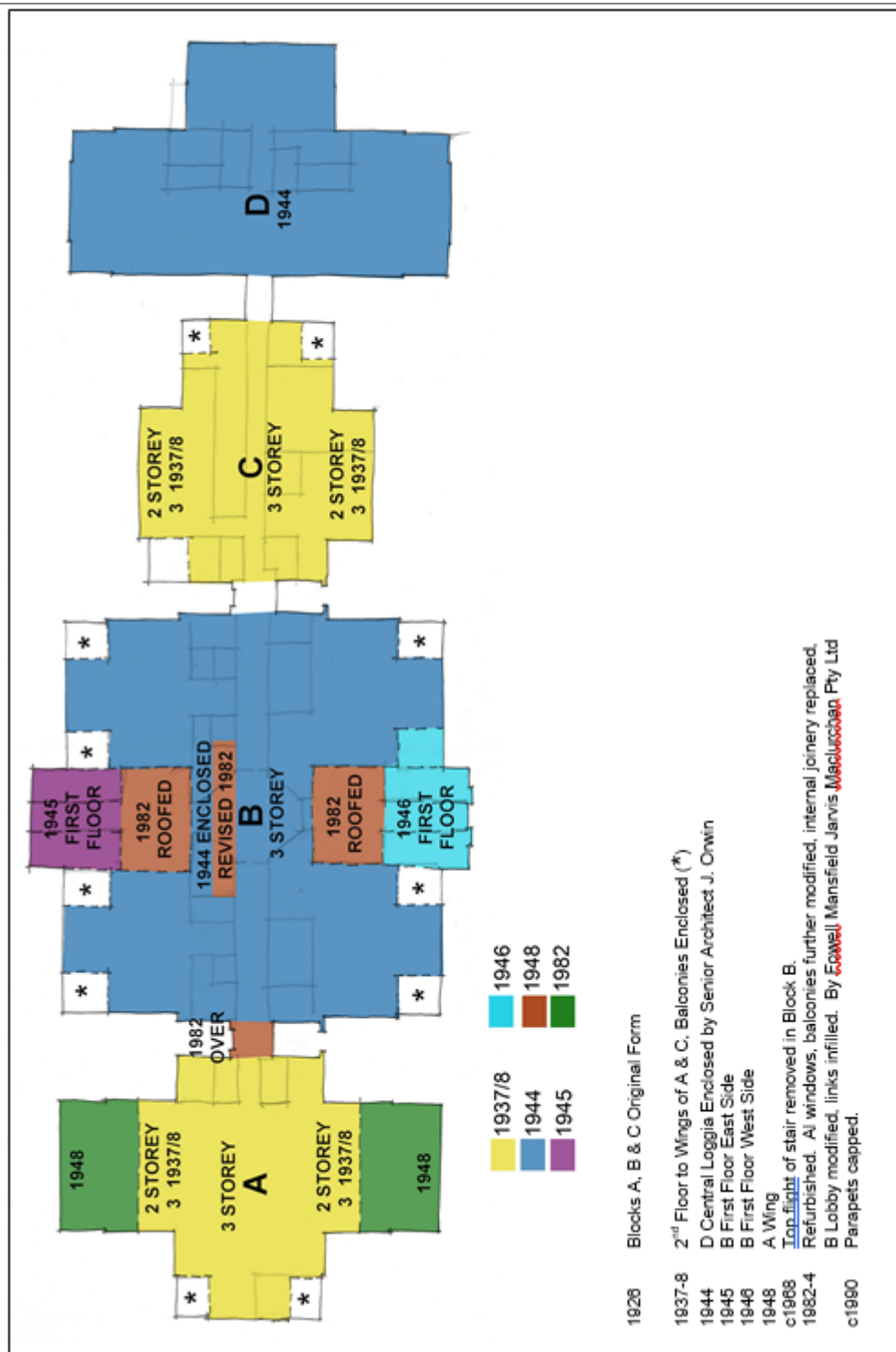


Figure 9: Plan of Changes

Source: 2010 HMP



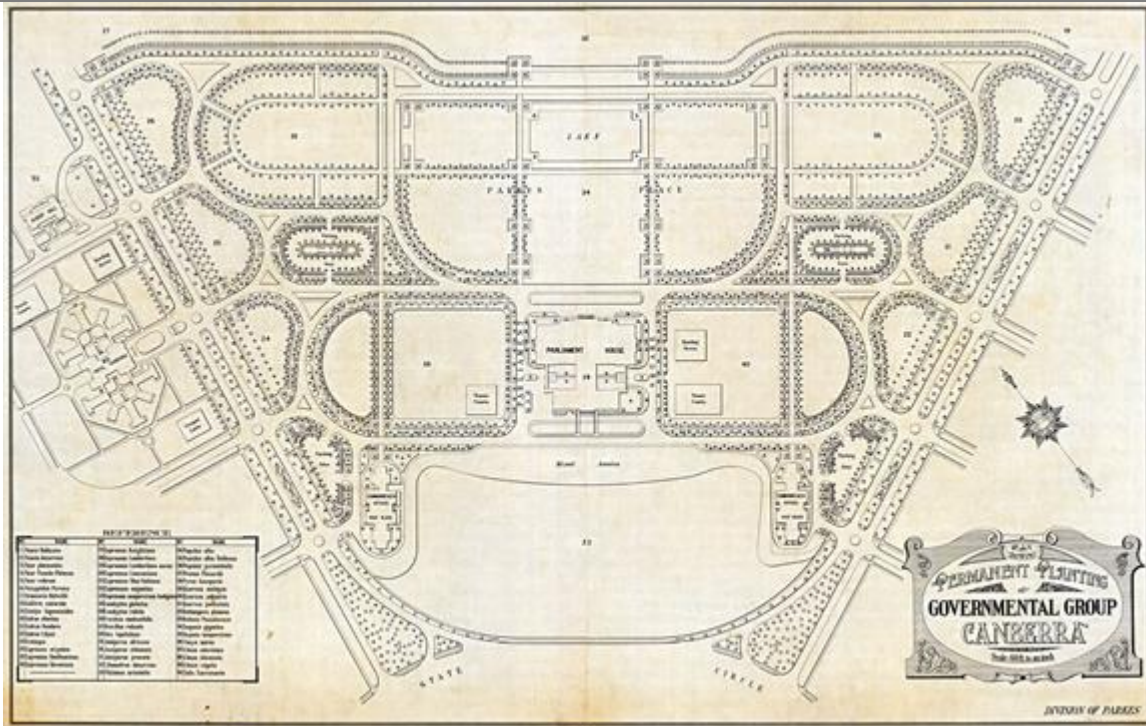


Figure 10: Permanent Planting for the Governmental group, Canberra, 1928. (NLA)

Source: National Library of Australia



Figure 11: Detail of the 1928 plan showing the West Block precinct with plantings numbered

Source: Duncan Marshall

PHOTOGRAPHS

**Figure 12: 1926 Completed Building**

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan

**Figure 13: 1926 Completed Building**

Source: Volume 2, 1994 Conservation Plan



Figure 14: Parliament House and gardens from West Block, 1934.

Source: NAA Images 7425



Figure 15: Panoramic view of the front of West Block from Queen Victoria Terrace, 2013.

Source: G Britton, 2013



Figure 16: Western side of Block A with two of the 1928 Arizona Cypress trees to the left.

Source: G Britton, 2013



Figure 17: Part of the earlier curved concrete edging remains near the front of west block.

Source: G Britton, 2013



Figure 18: West Block, Administrative Offices, Canberra, c. 1942

Source: Source: <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/41859389>



Figure 19: Symmetrical Facade

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, 2014



Figure 20: Symmetrical Facade

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, 2014



Figure 21: Division into Vertical Bays

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, 2014



Figure 22: Entablature

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, 2014

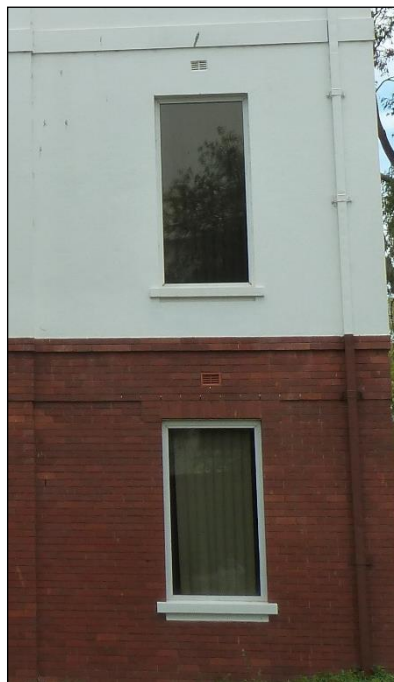


Figure 23: Simple Surface Finishes

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, 2014



Figure 24: The Dugout

Source: Eric Martin & Associates, 2014

CONDITION

Being refurbished in 2022/23 and will be in good condition when complete.

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 dugout is significant as a purpose-built World War II bomb shelter. Along with West Block it is important for accommodating strategic international communication functions of Australia's war time activities.

Attributes

All of the original form and fabric of West Block, and the Dugout.

Criterion B Rarity

The group of government buildings is uncommon. Only one other similar formal grouping exists in Australia, and that is the Commonwealth and State Offices Group in Brisbane, also designed by John Smith Murdoch.

Attributes

The location and appearance of West Block in relation to East Block, Old Parliament House and Parliamentary Triangle and the Land Axis

Criterion D Characteristic Values

The building is a fine example of Inter-War Stripped Classical style. It exhibits classical style proportions and features of arcaded entrance screens and courtyard arrival points.

Attributes

The building's original architectural design, including its classical style, proportions, arcaded entrance screens and courtyard arrival points.

Criterion E Aesthetic Characteristics

The unpretentious style of the building with its low horizontal massing, the role of the building as part of a group linked by architectural style and function, and the contribution of the building group as a feature of the designed landscape of the Parliamentary Triangle, are significant aesthetic qualities now greatly valued.

Attributes

The external form and appearance of building, plus its landscaped setting, especially in relation to the Parliamentary Triangle.

Criterion F Technical Achievement

West Block is a significant component of the Parliament House Secretariat group, which also includes East 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 designed landscape of related buildings and spaces. The group forms essential and important axial planning elements with 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-General of Works.

Attributes

The appearance and location of the building plus its designed landscape, in relation to East Block, Old Parliament House and the Parliamentary Triangle.

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 original form and fabric of the building, any remaining evidence of its use as the former National Library plus its architectural styling that demonstrates the involvement of JS Murdoch.

REFERENCES

Commonwealth Heritage List ID 105349 accessed 9 February 2023. 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=105428

Freeman Collett and Partners, *Conservation and Management Plan Vol 2*, 1994

Department of Finance Heritage Register Citation NoDFD-61010

Dowse, S., *West Block: the hidden world of Canberra's Mandarins*, Penguin Books, 1983.

Eric Martin & Associates, *West Block Heritage Management Plan*, 2014.

Metcalfe, Nancy and Ron, *Personal communication*. RNE file 8/1/489. March 2001.

