

Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter

Register of Significant Architecture

RSA No: R143

Name of Place: Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct

Other/Former Names:

Address: The whole of Blocks 5 to 8, Section 37 of Hackett, including houses numbered 32 to 98 and 110 to 130 Grayson Street, Hackett 2602

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|-------------------------|------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Listing Status: | Registered | Other Heritage Listings: | None |
| Date of Listing: | May 2022 | Level of Significance: | Territory |
| Citation Revision No: | | Category: | Residential |
| Citation Revision Date: | | Style: | Late 20thC Sydney Regional |
| Date of Design: | 1966 | Architect/Planner: | Dirk Bolt |
| Construction Period: | 1966-73 | Client/Owner/Lessee: | NCDC |
| | | Builders: | Several developers |

Statement of Significance

The Hackett Housing Precinct, designed in 1966 with 50 houses on four blocks, was the first major precinct of courtyard housing developed by the National Capital Development Commission. It has an important place in the ACT's cultural history, due to the success of the precinct which led to the NCDC providing alternative forms of housing for Canberra's suburban lifestyles, thus steering the city's cultural history in a new direction in the 1970s.

The precinct demonstrates a high degree of creative achievement by the modernist architect and planner Dirk Bolt. He planned the whole precinct on a square grid, subtly relieved at the extreme corners where key houses are set at angles. The vehicular access from Grayson Street and the non-vehicular access to the pedestrian/bicycle system through communal landscaped areas to parkland was particularly innovative for mid-1960s Canberra. The house designs were founded on proportions based on the golden mean, the use of natural materials and careful detailing, with space flowing satisfyingly between the inside and outside. They have continuous glazing to living spaces and bedrooms to take advantage of their mostly north orientation.

Dirk Bolt is important for the significant role he played in Canberra's cultural history from 1964 to 1971. The city was being transformed by the National Capital Development Commission and he was responsible for the design and siting of this and several other housing precincts and many neighbourhood and group centres. He also designed several meritorious houses and other buildings.

Description and Condition

Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct today contains 45 dwellings in four blocks numbered west to east Groups 1 to 4. Each block has road access from Grayson Street via a cul-de-sac. The whole development was planned on a 20' x 20' (6.1m x 6.1m) square grid. There are four types of dwelling – Types A and B being single storey houses, Type C two storey in a duplex and a Type D two storey house. More than half have a north orientation.¹ The dwelling numbers are 22 Type A; 15 Type B; 6 Type C and 2 Type D.

The houses, with forms and textures appropriate to the terrain and their function, have characteristics of the Late 20th Century Sydney Regional Style.² Each house has walls of either white-painted bagged brickwork or cream face brick, a gabled roof clad in concrete tiles and a walled landscaped courtyard with a gate providing pedestrian or cycle access to a belt of parkland which stretches from the local school and shopping centre to the bush-clad slopes of Mount Majura. All houses have continuous timber-framed glazing to living spaces and bedrooms. There is a small square window in most end walls. Garages and car ports have flat

metal roofs and sliding timber doors. The house designs were founded on proportions based on the golden mean, the flow of space between the inside and outside, the use of natural materials and careful detailing. Bolt's approach was to use low cost, basic materials for structural elements and higher quality materials and fittings for things people touched: joinery, doors, windows and associated fittings.³

Background/History

A private courtyard was a universal feature of houses dating back to the ancient Roman, Chinese and Islamic cultures. Mies van der Rohe designed courtyard housing for Berlin in 1931 and Jorn Utzon designed a group of 63 in Denmark in 1957. The first in Canberra were six designed by Sir Roy Grounds in 1958 and built for him in Forrest in 1961. Sydney Ancher included 16 courtyard houses, or "garden flats" in his design for the Northbourne Housing Precinct in 1959.⁴ Built in 1962, only four survive, vacant and in poor condition.⁵

In 1964 the architect and planner Dirk Bolt moved from Hobart to Canberra to further his ideas for modern architecture, later recalling "I believed a new world could be in the making".⁶ At the time, the National Capital Development Commission was transforming Canberra into a city worthy of its symbolic purpose. Dirk Bolt (1930-2020) had begun studying architecture in The Netherlands and in 1951 migrated to Hobart, where he completed courses in architecture and town planning and became a successful modernist architect. He is regarded as Tasmania's most significant 'New Australian' architect.⁷

Extensive suburban growth was being planned by the NCDC for Canberra, which recognised the conservative preference of Canberrans for detached houses and gardens, but was sympathetic to alternatives. Concerned people feared that Canberra's development was going down the usual path of urban sprawl, and the prominent Sydney architect Ian McKay urged the creation of 'well designed medium density areas, in the form of court or terrace housing.'⁸ The need to consider such housing in 1965 was met by Bolt's first report for the NCDC, "Non-standard Housing, Hackett" which suggested four different types of housing. The preferred type was houses with walled garden courts, in groups along central entrance roads. This became the Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct. Later, Bolt was responsible for the design and siting of several other housing precincts and many neighbourhood and group centres.⁹

In designing group housing schemes, some in association with shopping centres, Bolt demonstrated his interest in the urban as well as the built form. Bolt's central planning themes in group housing were to provide a range of housing types and access to outdoor private space. His rationale was that in each development, providing a mix in the numbers of bedrooms, and hence of family structures and lifestyles, would help promote interaction between people of different ages and social groups. The other key principle was that each dwelling should offer the opportunity to move easily from living areas into private open space. So where gardens were not possible, people had access to courtyards or broad terraces. Where these were not feasible, there were balconies.

Bolt's multi-unit housing schemes were among the first of their type in Australia. The courtyard housing at Hackett pre-dates other similar schemes: Swinger Hill Cluster Housing, Canberra (Ian McKay, 1972), Urambi Village, Canberra (Michael Dysart, 1976) and Winter Park, Doncaster, Victoria (Graeme Gunn, 1970). Bolt produced control drawings in 1967 of ten courtyard houses in a row along Bachelor Street, Torrens for the NCDC which were later built. These townhouses are the first stepped, three storey developments in Canberra and were designed around the same time as The Penthouses at Darling Point, New South Wales (Ken Woolley, 1968).

Bolt has recalled "The Hackett courtyard housing is an application of a planning concept that I compared to two hands spread horizontally so that the fingers interlink; the one hand representing vehicular and the other non-vehicular traffic. The vehicular access system connected to Grayson Street and the non-vehicular system to the pedestrian/bicycle system linking the Hackett centre west of the housing complex... The Hackett courtyard housing provides a model of dual-mode access to both society and nature."

The development of the four blocks was staged from 1966 to 1973, with Block 5 (Group 4) auctioned in May 1966 and constructed by 1971. Block 8 (Group 1) was auctioned in 1972. Until 2021 there were 50 houses, but five were then demolished due to loose-fill asbestos contamination.¹⁰

Following the acceptance of Bolt's innovative Hackett precinct, the NCDC stated in 1970 "the Commission is carefully exploring the demand for courtyard housing following the recent housing survey which revealed some interest in it."¹¹ The NCDC had already engaged Ian McKay in 1969 to design a much more extensive medium density housing development in the Woden Valley, which became the Swinger Hill Housing Precinct.¹² It includes mainly courtyard houses, as well as terraces and single storey houses with internal courtyards. It is entered in the ACT Heritage Register as the Swinger Hill Cluster Housing, Phillip. Its planning and development was in direct response to NCDC's recognition of a need to curtail urban sprawl and minimise an otherwise wasteful use of land resources.¹³

ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA IN THE HERITAGE ACT 2004

a. Importance in the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural or natural history.

The Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct has an important place in the ACT's cultural history, being the first major precinct of courtyard housing developed by the National Capital Development Commission. Canberra's development was in danger of going down the usual path of urban sprawl, but the NCDC, while recognising the conservative preference of Canberrans for detached houses and gardens, was sympathetic to alternatives. Following Bolt's report "Non-standard Housing, Hackett" and the success of the precinct, the NCDC steered Canberra's cultural history in a new direction in the 1970s by providing alternative forms of suburban lifestyles in housing developments, in particular the larger Swinger Hill Housing Precinct.

b. Has uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural or natural history.

The Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct is an uncommon example of a non-standard courtyard housing precinct designed in the 1960s for Canberra. The way the housing is laid out with dual-mode access to both society and nature is particularly rare. It is Canberra's most innovative example of a mid-century avant guard development of courtyard housing.

d. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects.

The Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of mid-century modern courtyard housing in a variety of forms. These include single-storey two-bedroom, single-storey three-bedroom and two-storey four-bedroom detached houses and two-storey duplex houses, all with access to outdoor private space.

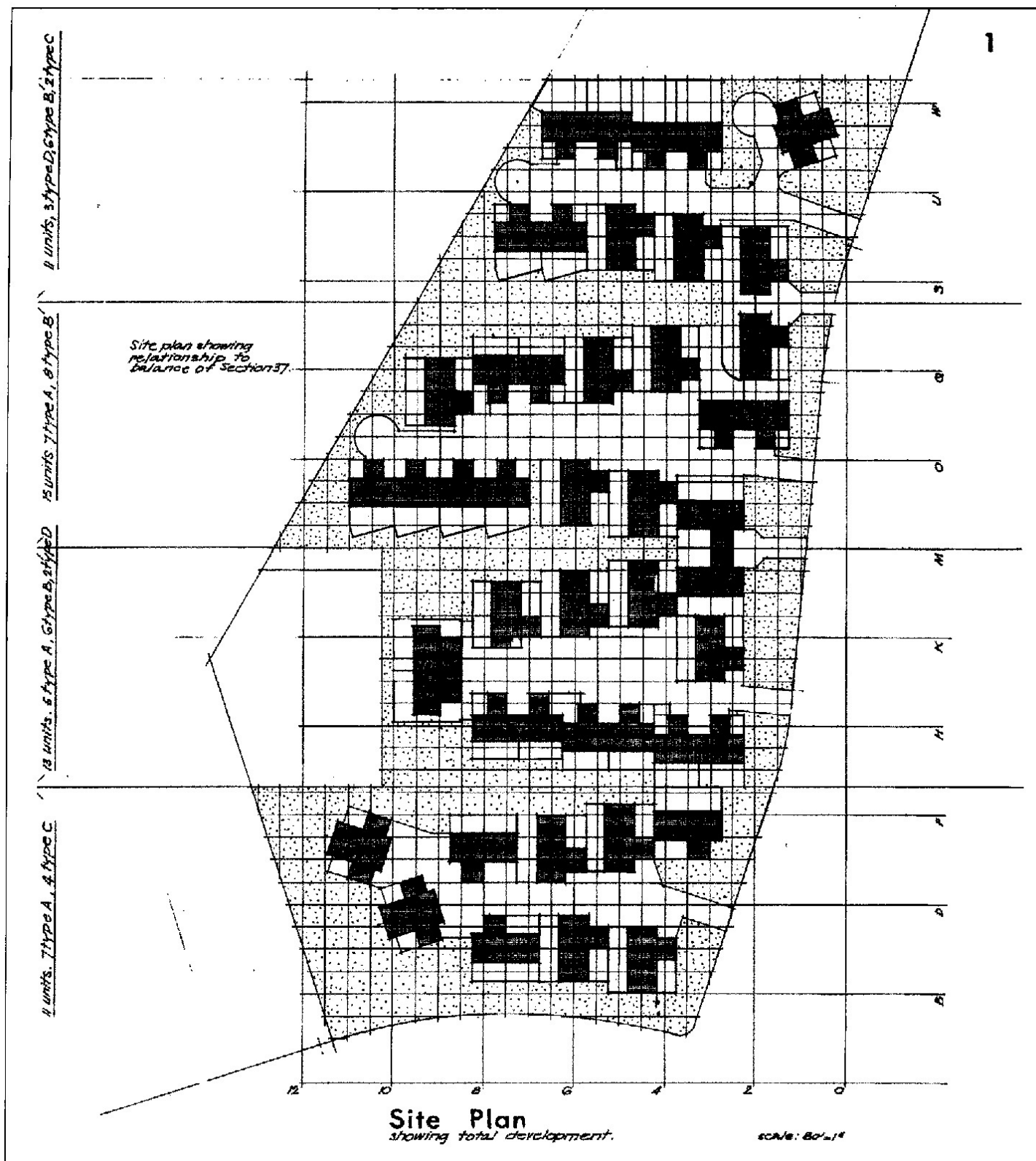
f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period.

The Hackett Housing Precinct demonstrates a high degree of creative achievement by the modernist architect and planner Dirk Bolt. He planned the whole precinct on a square grid, subtly relieved at the extreme corners where key houses are set at angles. The vehicular access from Grayson Street and the non-vehicular system to the pedestrian/bicycle system through communal landscaped areas to parkland was particularly innovative for mid-1960s Canberra.

The house designs were founded on proportions based on the golden mean, the use of natural materials and careful detailing, with space flowing satisfyingly between the inside and outside. They have continuous timber-framed glazing to living spaces and bedrooms to take advantage of their mostly north orientation.

h. Has a special association with the life and work of a person, or people, important to the history of the ACT.

The Hackett Courtyard Housing Precinct meets this criterion, for its associations with the National Capital Development Commission, which transformed Canberra into a city worthy of its symbolic purpose, and the notable architect and planner, Dirk Bolt, who played a significant role in Canberra's cultural history from 1964 to 1971. Bolt was engaged by the National Capital Development Commission for the design and siting of many neighbourhood and group centres. He also designed several meritorious houses and other buildings.

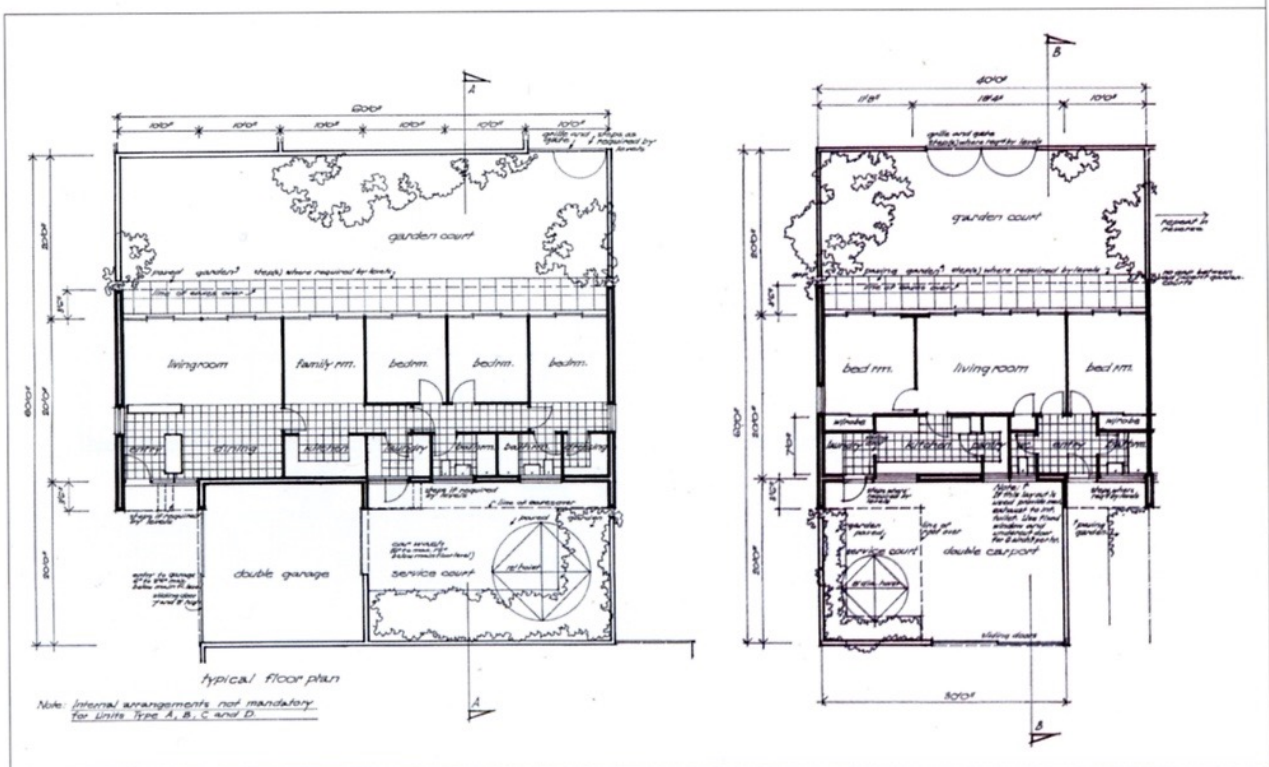


Site Plan of Hackett Courtyard Housing. Group 1 is at the bottom and Group 4 at the top. North is to the left.

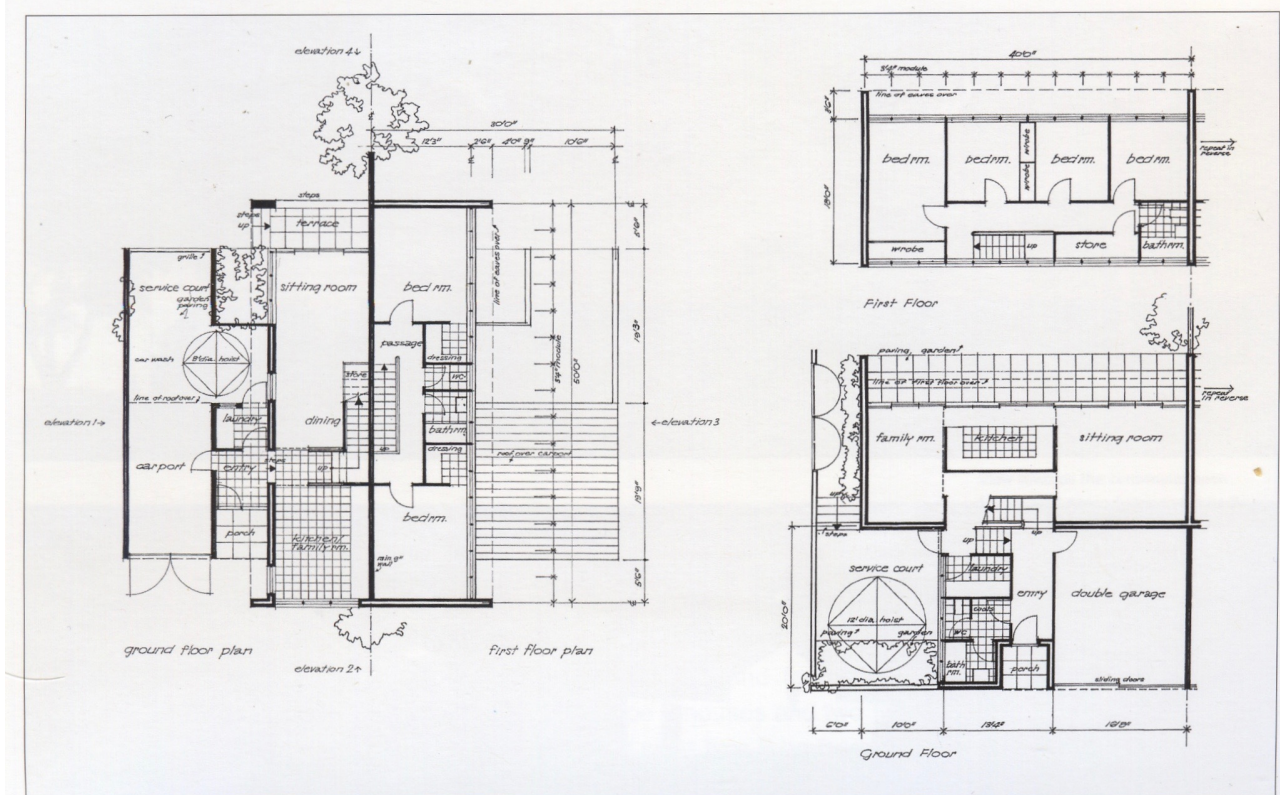
Bolt provided vehicular access off Grayson Street, to the right, and located the communal open landscaped spaces between each group, opening onto the public parkland to the north.



ACTPLA photo, December 2021

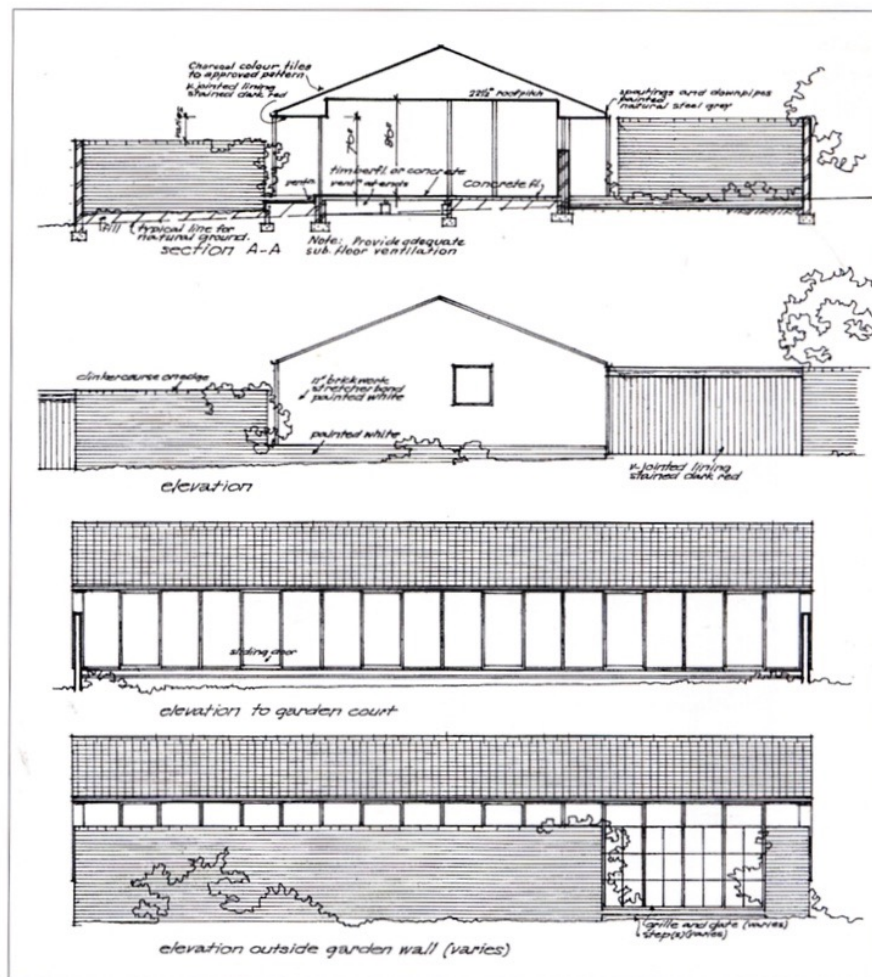


Left: Plan of Type A single storey house. Right: Plan of Type B single storey house



Left: Plan of Type C Duplex two storey houses

Right: Plan of Type D two storey house



Elevation and Section of Type A single storey house.



Type A houses in Group 4



Type B house, left and Type A house in Group 4



Type C duplex houses in Group 1



Type B house in Group 3, from Grayson Street



Type B house in Group 3



Two Type D houses in Group 2, from the parkland



Type B house in Group 4



The cul-de-sac in Group 3, from the parkland

Citation and photos by Ken Charlton, April 2022

END NOTES

¹ Graeme Trickett, *Repose The Contribution of Dirk Bolt to Canberra's Architecture and Planning*, AIA (ACT) 2013, p.124.

² Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds. *Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. A & R 1989, p243

³ <http://www.canberrahouse.com.au/people/dirk-bolt.html>

⁴ Graeme Trickett, *Repose...* p. 123

⁵ Site inspection by Ken Charlton in April 2022.

⁶ Dirk Bolt, pers. comm. to Graeme Trickett, June 2009. Quoted in *Repose The Contribution of Dirk Bolt to Canberra's Architecture and Planning*, AIA 2013, p. 20.

⁷ Barry McNeill, 'Dirk Bolt' in *The Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture*, CUP, 2012, p. 97.

⁸ Tim Reeves and Alan Roberts, 'Swinger Hill Housing Precinct' in *100 Canberra Houses A Century of Capital Architecture*, Halstead Press, 2013, p.168.

⁹ Graeme Trickett, *Repose...*

¹⁰ Chris Mobbs, Chair, Hackett Community Association, pers. comm to Ken Charlton, 10 April 2022.

¹¹ *National Capital Development Commission, Annual Report*, issue 13, p.32.

¹² Reeves and Roberts, op cit.

¹³ https://www.environment.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/234833/182jan.pdf