

# Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter

## Register of Significant Architecture

**RSA No: R035**

**Name of Place:** **Mercure Canberra**

**Other/Former Names:** Hotel Ainslie  
Ainslie Rex  
Olims Canberra Hotel

**Address:** Corner Limestone Avenue & Ainslie Avenue BRADDON 2612  
Block 5 Section 56 of Braddon

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	ACT Registered
Date of Listing:	1984	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation Revision No:	2 (K Charlton)	Category:	Hotel
Citation Revision Date:	March 2022	Style:	Arts & Crafts
Date of Design:	1926	Architects:	Burcham Clamp & Finch
Construction Period:	1926-27	Client/Owner/Lessee:	FCC
		Builder:	George & Elphinstone
Date of Additions:	1987	Architects:	Geoff Butterworth & Partners

### Statement of Significance

The Mercure Canberra, formerly the Hotel Ainslie, was one of the early hostels built as part of the Federal Capital Commission's building program for the growing population of Canberra resulting from the transfer of Parliament and public servants from Melbourne. It was only briefly a hostel before it became a licensed hotel and played an important role in the development of Canberra.

The Mercure Canberra is important to many long-term residents of Canberra as a physical reminder of the early social history of the national capital. It is a significant landmark in the inner city and a focal point in the establishment and development of its social life. The hotel has for long been a place to celebrate personal and important events in the lives of the community.

Advantage has been taken of the location at the junction of busy roads to create a dominant landmark, representing the early history of Canberra and its varied architectural styles. The building is a fine example of the work of the architect John Burcham Clamp, showing the influence of the English Arts and Crafts style, which he helped introduce to Australia.

The mature Roman Cypresses and Atlas Cedars at the front of the hotel, others along Batman Street and the landscaped central courtyard are intrinsic to the hotel's heritage significance.

### Description and Condition

The Mercure Canberra, when completed in May 1927 as the Hotel Ainslie, was reported as "built from plans by Messrs. Burcham Clamp and Finch, architects, of Sydney, by Messrs. George and Elphinstone, builders, erected in the shape of the letter Y...in brick with tiled roof." The accommodation was for 60 guests and a large staff, with reception rooms, billiard and dining rooms, sitting rooms, and 40 bedrooms, together with bathrooms. There was a kitchen block, a staff recreation room and an entrance porte-cochere. The grounds were being laid out and planted.<sup>1</sup> *The Canberra Times* reported "This building affords yet another example of variation of plan and external design (of hostels). The comparatively high pitched roof gives this building a distinction of its own. In plan, the rectangular outline is again departed from and the bedroom wings spring obliquely from the central dining and kitchen block."<sup>2</sup>

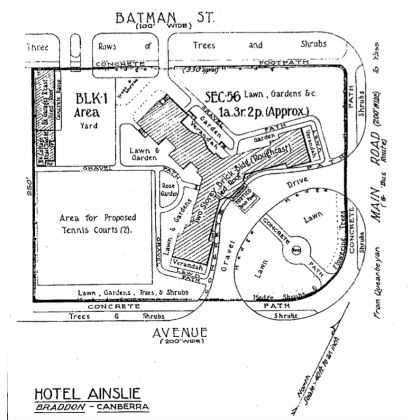
Clamp drew on the Arts and Crafts style, the most striking elements of the hotel being symmetrical eccentric gables characteristic of country houses in England such as those by the architect C.F.A. Voysey. Clamp's design focussed attention on the central entrance with a prominent Free Classical style porte-cochere. Substantial additions completed in 1987 created a much larger hotel complex.<sup>3</sup> There are 87 additional bedrooms, a new public bar, bistro bar, restaurant and beer garden.<sup>4</sup> The architects were Geoff Butterworth and Partners.<sup>5</sup> Today the hotel remains a landmark, as its architect intended, effectively addressing its corner site. Two main floors with attics are in the original rendered-brick and tile-roofed building. The additions,

apart from the street-front beer garden structures, are sympathetic to the original. The hotel reception and lounge interiors retain their original 1920s character. Mature Atlas Cedars and Roman Cypresses at the front of the hotel and the avenue of trees along Batman Street add to the hotel's aesthetic appeal.

## Background/History

Hostels, to provide communal accommodation and food, were key elements in the Federal Government's strategy for the development of Canberra, by an administration hard-pressed to house its workers. In the time of the Federal Capital Advisory Committee, (1921-4) four hostels were provided, designed by the Chief Architect of the Commonwealth, John S. Murdoch. Then the Federal Capital Commission (1925-9), erected four others to designs by non-government architects for architectural variety. The Sydney firm Burcham Clamp and Finch was allocated a site at the intersection of Ainslie Avenue and today's Limestone Avenue, originally the road from Queanbeyan to Yass.<sup>6</sup> The Hotel Ainslie was completed there as a hostel for 60 guests in 1927, in time for the opening of Parliament. Official guests at that opening who stayed in the hostel included Walter and Marion Griffin, John S. Murdoch and the FCT Administrator, Colonel Miller.<sup>7</sup> The hostel closed in 1928 and in 1932 reopened as a licensed hotel. The lessees, E. & E. Spendelove, advertised it as 'The Leading Tourist Hotel in the Federal Territory'.<sup>8</sup> In 1939 seven more bedrooms, designed by architects Moir and Sutherland with the latest modern furnishings were added.<sup>9</sup> The licence was not renewed in 1942, when the Department of the Interior took it over for public servants, with the name 'Ainslie Ladies Hostel'. When again licensed, it became the Ainslie Rex Hotel in the 1950s. The Schwartz Family Company operated it as the Olim's Hotel Canberra from 1989 until it became the Mercure Canberra in 2011.<sup>10</sup>

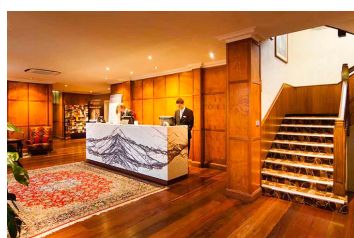
The architect John Burcham Clamp (1869-1931), born and educated in Sydney, studied architecture as an articulated student and at evening classes. In 1889 he was the first student admitted to the Institute of Architects of NSW, having been awarded its gold medal. His practice began in 1901, with hospitals, church buildings and major projects in the first decade. He was responsible for dozens of notable houses in Sydney. An enthusiast for the winning Federal Capital design, Clamp met Griffin in Chicago and again when he arrived in Sydney in 1913. This led to a brief partnership with Griffin in 1914. Clamp's domestic architecture in the early 20th century drew on influences from the English Arts and Crafts movement, which advocated utility combined with beauty.<sup>11</sup> A 1928 cottage Clamp designed for David Elphinstone, builder of the Hotel Ainslie, exists in Higgins Crescent, Ainslie. Its plan has similarities to the unbuilt cottages Griffin intended for Canberra.<sup>12</sup> Clamp was also the architect for the Gothic Revival Canberra Grammar School (1929-34) with his son John, who replaced Finch in Clamp's practice. Clamp Jnr designed St Paul's, Manuka (1937-63) in a geometric Gothic style reminiscent of Griffin's architecture.<sup>13</sup>



Clockwise:  
Site Plan, Australian  
Archives (ACT)  
A1/15 1932/4650

ACTPLA Aerial  
photo, 12/21

Mercure Canberra  
13/3/2022 Photo: KC



Lobby & Lounge  
interiors. Photos:  
Mercure Canberra  
Website, 2022



## ASSESSMENT AGAINST CRITERIA IN THE HERITAGE ACT 2004

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

The Mercure Canberra, formerly the Hotel Ainslie, is important in the course of the ACT's cultural history. It was one of the early hostels built as part of the Federal Capital Commission's building program for the growing population of Canberra resulting from the transfer of Parliament and public servants from Melbourne. It was only briefly a hostel before it became a licensed hotel and has played an important role in the development of Canberra until the present day.

### e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT

The Mercure Canberra is a significant landmark in inner Canberra, valued as such by the ACT community.

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

Advantage has been taken of the location at the junction of busy roads to create a dominant landmark, representing the early history of Canberra and its varied architectural styles. The building is a fine example of the work of the architect John Burcham Clamp.

### g. Has a strong or special association with the ACT community, or a cultural group in the ACT for social, cultural or spiritual reasons

The Mercure Canberra is important to many long-term residents of Canberra as a physical reminder of the early social history of the national capital. The hotel has for long been a place to celebrate personal and important events in the lives of the community. It is a focal point in the establishment and development of its social life.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Hotel Ainslie at Canberra' *Sydney Morning Herald* 4/5/1927 p27

<sup>2</sup> *The Canberra Times* 6/1/27 p10

<sup>3</sup> Kay Legge and Barbara Wheeler, 'Remembering the Early Hostels' in *There Early Canberra House - Living in Canberra 1911-1933*, Federal Capital Press, ed by Peter Freeman, 1996 p87

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mercurecanberra.com.au/about-mercure/our-history/>

<sup>5</sup> Shibu Dutta, *The Heritage of Reid*, Reid Residents Association, 2000 p73

<sup>6</sup> Legge and Wheeler, op cit

<sup>7</sup> Jim Gibbney, *Canberra 1913-1953*, AGPS 1988, p126

<sup>8</sup> Prometheus magazine advertisement, 1934 reproduced on the Canberra Tracks interpretation board in front of the hotel.

<sup>9</sup> Report from a lodger quoted on the Canberra Tracks interpretation board.

<sup>10</sup> 'Olims No More' in *The Canberra Times* 6/10/2011

<sup>11</sup> Julie Willis and Anne Higham, 'Clamp, John Burcham' in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, CUP, 2012, p147

<sup>12</sup> ACT Building files for 21 Higgins Crescent, Block 14 Section 10 of Ainslie

<sup>13</sup> Ken Charlton, *Federal Capital Architecture - Canberra 1911-1939*, NT of A (ACT), 2nd Ed 2002, p66 & 69