

# Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter

## Register of Significant Architecture

**RSA No: R 152**

**Name of Place:**       **Torrens Townhouses Precinct**

**Address/Location:**   A precinct with 32 Dwellings comprising:  
Building 1 (12 Dwellings) facing Beasley Street; 1/1 to 12/1 Basedow Street  
Building 2 (8 Dwellings) Davies Place,               1/1 to 8/1, Davies Place  
Building 3 (12 Dwellings), Davies Place,           1/3 to 12/3 Davies Place  
located on Blocks 1, 2 and 3, Section 35, Torrens

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	March 2025	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation Revision No:		Category:	Residential
		Style:	Late 20thC Sydney Regional
Date of Design:	1967	Architect/Planner:	Dirk Bolt
Construction Period:	1968-73	Client/Owner/Lessee:	NCDC

Citation prepared by Ken Charlton AM LFRAIA, who took the unattributed photos in November 2024

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### Statement of Significance

The Torrens Townhouses Precinct is comprised of three important examples of the visionary mid-century architect Dirk Bolt's non-standard housing, provided by the National Capital Development Commission, which were innovative for Canberra in the 1960s. Building 1 has individual single-storey units on three levels, stepping down towards the street to the north – a cascading form which was coming into favour at the time. Building 2 is a row of rare two-storey courtyard houses and Building 3 has a variety of tiered dwellings on two levels.

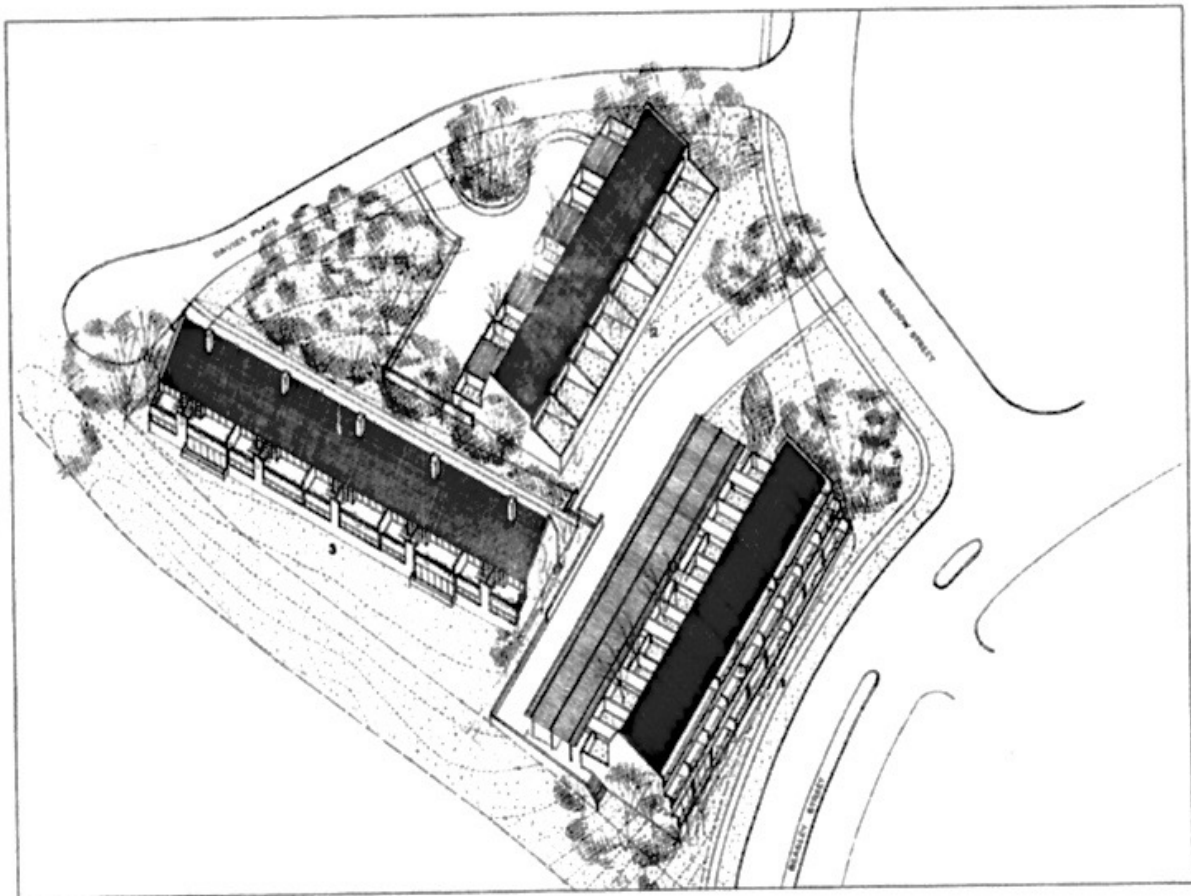
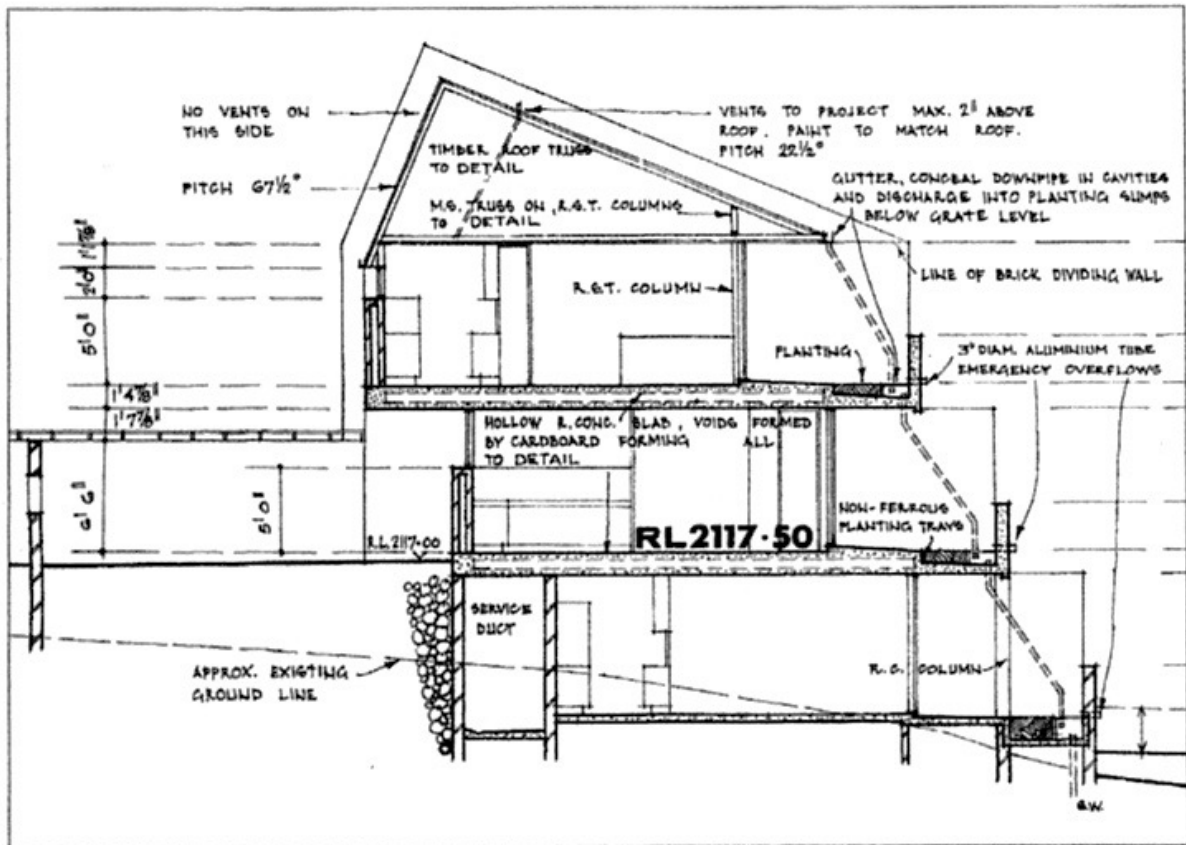
The precinct is also important for the way it forms an appropriate setting for the Torrens Neighbourhood Centre. Dirk Bolt and the NCDC took the opportunity in 1967 to locate these large buildings prominently, where traffic enters and exits the Neighbourhood Centre.

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### Description

The Torrens Townhouses Precinct comprises three non-standard residential blocks, with one elongated building on each block. Buildings 1 and 2 extend in an east-west direction and Building 3 in a north-south direction. Bolt designed individual buildings for each block. Buildings One and Two were a variation on his central planning doctrine (see Background/History) while Building Three was based directly on it. The 90° off-centre gabled roof form was chosen by Bolt in the design of the Torrens neighbourhood centre to give it prominence within the suburb and to relate to its location on the slopes of Mount Taylor. Building 1 has three storeys and buildings 2 and 3 two storeys.

The architectural language for the three buildings is consistent throughout; Swiss-patterned dark-red cement roof tiles (originally proposed as terracotta tiles), bagged and white-painted flush-jointed brickwork, continuous timber-framed glazing enclosed by brick end walls however the finish is not boarded), off-form in situ concrete terrace balustrade walls (originally proposed to be with a vertical-boarded finish however the finish is not boarded), flat-roofed carports to buildings 1 and 2, timber stained dark brown (originally proposed as dark red), and metalwork painted grey. Building 1 was placed along the site contours and faces onto Beasley Street, where each dwelling has a northerly aspect. The building was originally to include 3 three-bedroom dwellings on both the top and bottom levels, and 3 one-bedroom dwellings and 3 bed-sitter dwellings on the middle level, but this may have varied as constructed. The finished ground level is raised to allow the building to be entered off grade from the south, at the middle level, and to accommodate open carports under a separate continuous flat roof to the south. Each level steps back from the level below with the lowest-level partly underground. Bolt cantilevered the upper level over the entries and opened all the dwellings at each level onto a full-width northern landscaped terrace. The placement of the wider dwellings at the lower level required the middle-level terrace continuous concrete balustrade wall to be supported by concrete columns, as well as the lower-level party walls.



Top: Section through Building 1 showing the stepping of each unit, the upper level cantilevered over the middle and the lower partly below ground.

Above: Building 1, right, along Beasley Street, Building 2 top with courtyards and Building 3 left behind.



Torrens Townhouses Building 1 from Beasley Street in 2024



Torrens Townhouses Building 2 at its Basedow Street end in 2024

Building 2, a row of 8 three-bedroom two-storey courtyard dwellings, lies partly across, and partly along, the site contours. Each unit has a northerly aspect and views towards the neighbourhood centre. Each townhouse has three equal square divisions at ground level and one division on the upper level. The divisions include the walled landscaped northern courtyard, the double-storey house proper, the carport and a separate flat-roofed laundry that closes the entry court. The lower level is divided into two divisions, the shallower southern division, including the entry, directly off the carport, and the kitchen. The kitchen overlooks the entry court and is separated from it by a return stair. The northern division of the open-planned living and dining room is fully glazed along the north façade with timber sliding doors opening out onto the courtyard. The upper level is divided into two divisions with one bedroom and the bathroom to the south and two bedrooms to the north. The upper-level floor cantilevers beyond the lower-level glazing, supported by a low-level concrete wall formed as an up-turned wall beam that spans across the continuous lower-level glazing.





Torrens Townhouses Building 3 from the east in 2024

Building 3 lies along the site contours and faces onto adjoining undeveloped single-residential blocks where each town house had an easterly aspect across the valley towards the neighbouring suburb of Farrer. The original proposal was for 2 three-bedroom dwellings, 6 two-bedroom dwellings, 2 one-bedroom dwellings and 2 bed-sitter dwellings but this may have varied as constructed. The upper levels have access to wide terraces that form the roofs of the lower levels; with the living areas for all of the dwellings, except the bed-sitters, on the upper level. The upper level extends over the carports and entries where a continuous reinforced-concrete wall beam spans over the openings to the entries and undercroft carports.

The private central return stairs are placed along the party wall to each town house. Bolt provided a brickwork external storeroom to each terrace, placed at the end of the stair well and against each alternate party wall, however these appear not to have been constructed. He extended a pergola from the storeroom out to the front of the terrace alongside the party wall and carried the brickwork up to eaves level in front of the concrete terrace balustrade walls, at the junction with the end of each alternate party wall. The rainwater downpipes are concealed inside the upper-level external party walls, with drains placed at the edges of the terraces within the planters. Pre-cast concrete rainwater heads, with overflows, protrude from the face of the lower-level wall with twin downpipes exposed on the face of the lower-level brickwork wall. The one, two and three-bedroom town houses extend over two levels with open-plan living areas on the upper level, opening onto spacious roof terraces, and east-facing bedrooms on the lower level. The laundries are adjacent to the carports. The town houses step down from their entry lobbies at ground level to facilitate a step at the upper level between the terraces and the interiors and maintain ceiling heights.

The ground-level bed-sitter entry lobby is approached directly from the carport. Each has a separate east-facing kitchen and a combined bathroom and laundry next to the entry. Bolt took advantage of the lower level being raised above the ground and placed a cantilevered balcony off each bed-sitter along the eastern side. The grey cement brick wall balustrades to these balconies correlate with the off-form concrete upper-level terrace walls. The one-bedroom dwellings are located above the bed-sitters, with ground-level entries, and are planned in three divisions. The terrace and the open-planned living-dining area are two equal divisions. The shallower western division includes the bedroom, separate kitchen and bathroom.

The two-bedroom dwellings are two-thirds the width of the other town houses. They are planned in three equal divisions, each in a 2:3 ratio: the terrace division, the living area division, and the dining/kitchen western division. The lower-level bedrooms are along the eastern side with the bathroom adjacent to the entry and carport. The three-bedroom dwellings have a similar plan to the two-bedroom town houses, with a deeper living room and the dining room turned 90° along the western side. The lower level includes an additional bedroom and two bathrooms adjacent to the double carport.

The whole site has total of 32 residences, 20 having a north orientation, in a park-like setting with mature trees adjacent to the neighbourhood centre, painted at first while the brickwork sloping party walls to Building 2's courtyards have been left fair faced. The town houses are well maintained and are in good condition.

## Background/History

Residential buildings with a cascading form and elevated terraces were becoming influential throughout much of the world during the 1960s. When Dirk Bolt came to Canberra in October 1964, he met with National Capital Development Commission staff, seeking work as a town planning consultant. Bolt's first commission for the NCDC was a housing scheme for Hackett. His initial report, *Non-standard Housing, Hackett*, investigated four different housing types: clusters of four courtyard houses; row housing with the subdivision pattern in the form of an arc; higher than normal density housing with two tiers of units set down the contours.

After Bolt had been commissioned by the NCDC to prepare the architectural control drawings for the adjacent Torrens Neighbourhood Centre and courtyard housing in Bachelor Street to the north, he was commissioned to design townhouses to the south. The drawings produced by Bolt were dated 1967 and the first buildings were completed in 1969.<sup>1</sup>

The first of the townhouse schemes Bolt was engaged by the NCDC to design had been in 1966 at Aranda. He explained his planning doctrine for townhouses at the time:

The apartments could be formed at two levels, the upper level having access to wide balconies that formed the roof over the ground floor apartments. These would have courtyard gardens on the north side, whilst on the south side the space under the first floor compartment would be used for the car ports and entries to the apartments.

The housing groups were part of the "truly innovative series of medium-density housing groups" Bolt designed for the NCDC, of which "all are worthy of serious scrutiny today, as they involve deftly resolved issues of open space, light, air and ventilation, community and propinquity" as praised in 2013 by the architectural historian Philip Goad.<sup>2</sup>

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## Assessment Against Criteria in the Heritage ACT 2004

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

The Torrens Townhouses Precinct has a place in the ACT's planning history, by demonstrating associations with the introduction of three-storey housing with a cascading form and elevated terraces (Building 1), a row of courtyard houses (Building 2) and two-storey housing with a variety of forms, mainly with elevated terraces (Building 3), all of which were innovative in the late 1960s.

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

The Torrens Townhouses Precinct is important for demonstrating a high degree of creative achievement by Dirk Bolt, when he was engaged by the NCDC in the 1960s to plan non-standard housing schemes for Canberra. The cascading stepped housing form of Building 1 was new to Australia at the time. The only other known example is in Rushcutters Bay by Ken Woolley, 1967. The apartments in Building 3 that are formed over two levels, with the upper level having access to wide balconies that formed the roof of the ground floor level, whilst on the other side the space under the first floor incorporating the car ports and entries to the apartments was a new planning form in Australia at the time. The incorporation of upturn reinforced off-form concrete narrow beams forming the balustrades that span between the units to support the structure to all the buildings and permit full width glazing to the floors below was technically innovative at that time. The Torrens Townhouses Precinct, described as one of a "truly innovative series of medium-density housing groups" which "involve deftly resolved issues of open space, light, air and ventilation, community and propinquity" meets this criterion.

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

The Torrens Townhouses Precinct has special associations with 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, housing precincts and other buildings. The Torrens Townhouses Precinct, being evidence of Dirk Bolt's role in a changed approach by NCDC decision makers to suitable housing for Canberra, meets this criterion.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The definitive monograph on Dirk Bolt is *REPOSE: THE CONTRIBUTION OF DIRK BOLT TO CANBERRA'S ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING* by Graeme Trickett and Ken Charlton, 2013. Available from the AIA ACT Chapter, 2A Mugga Way, Red Hill ACT.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Goad, Chair of Architecture, University of Melbourne, in his Review of *REPOSE...* in 2013