

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R090
Name of Place: Trade Offices
Other/Former Names: Edmund Barton Offices
Address/Location: Kings Avenue BARTON 2600
Block Section of

Listing Status:
Date of Listing:
Citation Revision No:
Citation Revision Date:

Other Heritage Listings:
Level of Significance:
Category:
Style:

Date of Design:
Construction Period:
Date of Additions:

Designer:
Client/Owner/Lessee:
Builder:

Statement of Significance

The Edmund Barton Offices, located along Kings Avenue adjacent to the Parliamentary Triangle, is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. The office complex is a very good example of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-). The design incorporates most of the features which are specific to the style including: cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, and plain smooth wall surface.

The following design features are of additional significance: the courtyards and their sculptures, the fenestration design that is integral with the precast post-tensioned spandrel 'I' beams as a tensional pattern in window divisions incorporating overhang for shade, the precast post-tensioned 'T' floor beams, the open ground floor level, the 'Silo' circulation and service spaces and the conference centre with their contrasting non-rectangular shape, the detail and finishes.

The structural system employed, namely the precast post-tensioned 'T' floor beams supported by precast post-tensioned 'I' spandrel beams is a technically innovative solution. The extensive use of post-tensioned precast concrete for much of the structure was a relatively new building type.

The architecture of this office complex may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of late twentieth-century architectural styles.

Harry Seidler is recognised as one of Australia's leading architects of the modern movement.

This office complex is one of his largest projects in Australia and it clearly illustrates the principles on which his architecture is based. Seidler's recognition of this building as an example of his work highlights the significance of this project for its special association with him.

Description

The Edmund Barton Office building (also referred to as the Trade Group Offices) was designed by Harry Seidler and Associates for the NCDC starting in 1969 **1** and construction was completed in 1974 **2**. The building is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed and plain, smooth wall surface **3**.

Another example of this style in Canberra is the Benjamin Offices, by McConnel Smith & Johnson, (1978-9).

The planning of the Edmund Barton Offices can be contrasted with the "loose, dynamic" planning of the Cameron Offices by Andrews, (1976), the Benjamin Offices by McConnell Smith & Johnson, (1978-9) and the McLachlan Offices by Daryl Jackson Evan Walker Architects, (1980). Its "elemental geometric" form can be contrasted with the "symbolic, sculptural monument of the High Court of Australia" **4** (1980) and the National Gallery of Australia (1982) both by Edwards Madigan Torzillo & Briggs.

The Edmund Barton Offices are an excellent example of the NCDC's First Assistant Commissioner (Architect), 1968-72, Roger Johnson's "concept of buildings for central Canberra as individual statements in garden settings." **5** The buildings in and adjacent to the Parliamentary Triangle where to be subordinate in height and form to the proposed Parliament House which was planned to be located on the central land axis near the lake **6**. The offices impressive scale is appropriate to its context - one of being on the edge of the Parliamentary Triangle and Lake Burley Griffin.

The office building was the first major modern building to be built in or adjacent to the Parliamentary Triangle after the National Library by Bunning and Madden, (1968), which is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century Stripped Classical Style **7**.

The office was designed to accommodate 3,000 public servants on five column free levels surrounding two courtyards. This was achieved by placing the open plan offices into seven rectangular column free areas at each level, with services and circulation in six cylinder 'silos' and the special purpose area located within the courtyards. "This office complex most clearly elucidates the principles on which Seidler's architecture is based." **8**

These principles, that the building reflect the spirit of the time, its structure be reduced to its simplest form and components providing a repetitive, orderly expression of large scale elements with clean lines can be observed in the two main components of the offices; the precast concrete post-tensioned beam members. The 'T' floor beams spanning 15.8 metres are supported by the 'I' shaped 1.7 high x 1.2 deep spandrel edge beams spanning 22.5m between precast load bearing columns providing column free floors. The floor beams are 'expressed' on the facade of the building by stainless steel tendon couplers which cover the ends of the post-tensioning members. The "I" beams also have tendon couplers at their ends. Seidler worked with the eminent Italian engineer Pier Luigi Nervi to refine the design of these beam elements **9**.

The spandrel beams and "tensional pattern in window divisions"**10** formed by the ribbon windows increase the planar reading and sense of horizontality. The beams are the means by which the offices attain both their elevation and sense of compositional freedom. They free the ground level and signify a special structural system expressing Seidler's fundamental concern with the resolution of structural forces. The form displayed is a twentieth century equivalent of the Renaissance villa, man poised above nature.

The cylinder elements containing lifts, toilets, stairs and services are clad in curved precast wall panels set vertically and staggered. On the courtyard sides additional half curved stairs project from the facades. The contrast of rectangular forms with curved forms is a major theme of modern architecture.

The large courtyards provide a piazza like split level setting for two monumental sculptures, geometric gardens and the quadrant-shaped theatre (Conference Centre), a reoccurring form in Seidler's work. The Conference Centre has a wave shaped concrete roof supported by external beams that follow the form of the roof. The underside of the roof slab has boarded off-form exposed insitu concrete forming the ceiling. Internally the side walls have a Tyrolean rendered finish and the curved rear wall has vertical slatted timber covered acoustic panels.

"The rationality and singularity of the themes of the Barton Offices make for a resolved, skilled work of architecture." where the architect "has fully comprehended the scale and dimensions of the context and attuned the architecture to its demands." **11**

The main architectural elements that are specific to the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) and that are displayed by this building complex relate to the external forms. They are:

- cubiform overall shape,
- structural frame expressed,

- plain, smooth wall surface.

Other architectural elements of this style displayed by the building complex that relate to the external forms are:

- overhang for shade,
- Corbusian window motif,
- contrasting non-rectangular shape.

The major architectural elements listed above place this building in the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) **12**.

The building is in good condition and is well maintained. The ceiling of the open ground floor has had plaster infills added recently covering the expressive structure of the 'T' beams. Seidler's original exposure of the 'T' beams allowed the 'reading' of the building's structure. This reading of the structure can now only be seen at some of the entry lobbies.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

The office building is Seidler's major work in Canberra and is one of two office buildings in Canberra designed by him, the other being Ethos House in Civic, a building of minor significance. There are examples of his medium density residential housing in Garran, Campbell, Yarralumla and an individual house in Deakin, all of architectural significance. The Cameron Office exhibits much of his design philosophy of this period.

Harry Seidler arrived in Australia in 1948 after studying under and working for some of the leading architects of the modern movement, such as Gropius, Breuer, Albers and Niemeyer. He is recognised as one of Australia's leading architects and the first architect in Australia to express fully the principles of the Bauhaus **13**.

In Australia he has designed important residential and commercial buildings including the Rose Seidler House, Sydney 1949, Blues Point Tower, Sydney, 1962, Australia Square, Sydney, 1967, MLC Centre, Sydney, 1978, Grosvenor Place, Sydney, 1988, and Riverside Centre, Brisbane, 1986.

Overseas he has designed the Australian Embassy in Paris, 1977, the Hong Kong Club, Hong Kong, 1983 and recently a new mixed use and public housing scheme to accommodate 2,500 people in his native Vienna, Austria.

Harry Seidler was awarded the RAI Gold Medal in 1976 and the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1996.

Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991

(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time

The design of the office complex from 1969 in the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) represents a continuation and further development of the International style in Australia.

The Late Twentieth-Century International Style is a continuation of the Post-War International Style. Notable early Australian examples are the AMP Building, Sydney 1961, by Peddle Thorp & Walker, Australia Square, Sydney 1967 by Harry Seidler and the Water Board Building Sydney 1963, by McConnel Smith and Johnson.

The extensive use of post-tension precast concrete for much of the structure was a relatively new and innovative building system which was further utilised in many other office buildings. The use of post-tensioned precast concrete "T" floor beams which occurred in the late 1960s to mid 1970s

is now rare in Australia.

Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor believes that the planning and the incorporation of major precast elements by Seidler "most clearly elucidates the principles on which his architecture is based", and that "The rationality and singularity of the themes of the Barton Offices makes for a resolved, skilled work of architecture".

Harry Seidler is recognised as a key practitioner of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style of architecture. **14**

(ii) a place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group

The office complex exhibits the particular architectural elements specific to the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its Cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed and plain, smooth wall surface.

The following design features are of additional significance: the courtyards and their sculptures, the fenestration design that is integral with the precast post-tensioned spandrel 'I' beams as a tensional pattern in window divisions incorporating overhang for shade, the precast post-tensioned 'T' floor beams, the open ground floor level, the 'Silo' circulation and service spaces and the conference centre with their contrasting non-rectangular shape, the detail and finishes.

The office complex is well detailed and well built and is valued by the RAIA as an excellent example of this style of architecture by a prominent Australian architect. The Edmund Barton Office is of national significance.

(iii) a place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger or being lost, or is of exceptional interest

(iv) a place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations

(v) a place which is the only known or only comparatively intact example of its type

(vi) a place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principal characteristics of that class

(vii) a place which has strong or special associations with person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history

Harry Seidler played a significant role in Australia's cultural history. He is one of the most important architects of the late twentieth century in Australia and the first architect in Australia to express fully the principles of the Bauhaus. This is an important building in his career in terms of its size, prestige and that it expresses clearly the principles on which his architecture is based.

The Edmund Barton Office is featured in publications and is prominent in Seidler's own publications of his work.

Harry Seidler was awarded the RAIA Gold Medal in 1976 and the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1996.

The office complex is of much significance to Canberra and the nation, specifically in its early date and in the sound and far sighted vision of the National Capital Development Commission, notably that of the outstanding Commissioner, Sir John Overall.

(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site

Through its architectural style, planning and urban form this precinct is a valuable educational resource for designers. Its architecture is characteristic of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style and is an excellent example of the work of one of Australia's leading architects. It reflects the ideals of the vision of the NCDC for buildings to be individual statements in garden settings.

The architecture of this office complex and urban form may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of late twentieth-century architectural styles.

The Edmund Barton Office can be compared and contrasted in its rational and singular themes with the symbolic, sculptural monument of the High Court of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia, each of which can be seen to have their roots in Le Corbusier's concrete architecture.

References

- 1 Conversation Harry Seidler.
 - 2 Ibid. Jennifer Taylor Australian Architecture Since 1960. RAIA 1990.
 - 3 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds. Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present. Angus and Robertson 1989.
 - 4 Jennifer Taylor. Australian Architecture Since 1960. RAIA 1990.
 - 5 Ibid
 - 6 Conversation with Sir John Overall. Overall believes the siting of Parliament House was still not finalised until into the mid 1970s. Roger Johnson states in his article in the "Architecture Australia September 1980" that the lakeside site was abandoned in 1968.
 - 7 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds opcit.
 - 8 Jennifer Taylor opcit.
 - 9 Conversation with Harry Seidler.
 - 10 Ibid. Seidler prefers "Tensional pattern in window divisions" to that of "Corbusian window motif" when referring to ribbon windows.
 - 11 Jennifer Taylor opcit.
 - 12 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds opcit.
 - 13 Jennifer Taylor opcit.
 - 14 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds opcit.
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Other Information Sources