

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R106

Name of Place: Allawah & Bega Courts

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: Ainslie Avenue & Ballulmbir Street

Allawah Court	Block	Section 52 of Braddon
Bega Court	Block	Section 7 of Reid

Listing Status:

Other Heritage Listings:

Date of Listing:

Level of Significance:

Citation Revision No:

Category:

Citation Revision Date:

Style:

Date of Design:

Designer:

Construction Period:

Client/Owner/Lessee:

Date of Additions:

Builder:

Statement of Significance

The Allawah and Bega Courts complex of buildings from 1954 is a good example of Post-War International style design. The buildings exhibit some of the particular architectural elements specific to that style, including cubiform overall shapes and large sheets of glass. The fine proportions, crisp detailing and low scale of these three-storey blocks and their siting aligned with the street pattern have made them architecturally successful. The now-mature trees in and around the courts add to the aesthetic quality of the complex.

The complex is also of value for the way it demonstrates the planning and design of, and way of life in, Canberra's first medium density public housing, as Australia emerged from the period of austerity following the Second World War. It is a rare example in Canberra of its architects and planners being influenced in the decade immediately before the creation of the National Capital Development Commission by designs for English new towns.

Description

Sixteen three-storey blocks of two-bedroom flats designed in 1954 in the Canberra office of the Commonwealth Department of Works. The flats were completed in 1956 as public housing for the Department of the Interior. They comprise six blocks of eighteen flats along Ballumbir Street raised on columns over car parks with laundries under two blocks and ten blocks of twelve flats on the ground forming rectangular courts behind them. The Post-War International-style design is similar to post-war housing in Europe, particularly in English new towns. The fine proportions, crisp detailing and low scale of these three-storey blocks and their siting continuing the street pattern made them more architecturally successful than the three eight-storey blocks of flats along Currong Street which completed the development.

Each flat has a passage opening into a living room with a balcony, a kitchen, two bedrooms with built-in wardrobes, and a bathroom. Construction of the blocks is of face brick end walls; incised-patterned rendered-brick front and back walls; concrete floors and balconies and flat steel deck roofs without parapets. Each stairwell has a completely glazed wall and each flat has a full-height glazed frame the width of its living room and balcony. Wrought-iron balustrades outside entrances and on stair landings and balconies have a zigzag pattern. Adjoining balconies have thin concrete dividing and side walls and hoods.

The flats have been well maintained. Adjustable metal louvres have been added to all balconies

along Ballumbir Street for sun control. Wooden lean-to pergolas and enclosed small courtyards with brick walls and timber fence panels have been added to all ground-level flats. All glazed timber frames, external doors and windows have been replaced by anodised aluminium. Some of the front and back rendered walls were originally mustard-coloured and others were grey-blue, but all are now pale green. The now-mature trees in and around the courts add to the aesthetic quality of the complex.

The major architectural elements displayed in these buildings that are specific to the Post-War International style (1940-1960) relate to the external forms. They are:

- cubiform overall shapes,
- large sheets of glass.

Other architectural elements of this style displayed in these buildings that relate to the external forms are:

- plain, smooth wall surfaces,
- cantilevers,
- overhangs for shade.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

At the end of the Second World War public servants were reluctant to be transferred from Melbourne to Canberra. The first post-war transfer program in 1948, which proposed to transfer over 7000 public servants over ten years, failed. Its only outcome was the commencement of the construction of the Administrative Building for 3500 public servants. Acute shortages of workmen and materials made it difficult to meet the housing needs of Canberra's natural growth, so much more housing was needed for transferees by the time the Administrative Building was due to open.
1

Urging by the National Capital Planning and Development Committee in 1948 for Canberra to have a full-time town planner resulted in Trevor Gibson, a Sydney graduate who had been working in town planning in Britain, to be appointed in 1949 to head the town planning section of the

Department of Works and Housing.² The section was transferred in 1950 to the Department of the Interior in Canberra, which then became wholly responsible for developing the city. Gibson, in an address to a Congress on Regional and Town Planning in 1951 asserted that the population density resulting from the existing plan of Canberra was too low and "with a restrictive height limitation it is conceivable that avenue tree-planting.... will.... dominate almost every form of structural development." He recommended that the height limitation should be abolished and the skyline be diversified with punctuations - spires or blocks of flats.

The concept of the design of Allawah and Bega Courts and the adjacent Currong Apartments was the result of Gibson's recommendations to the National Capital Planning and Development Committee in 1952 that new types and designs for residential development be used, to provide increased density. He referred to zoning in the newer English towns and compared the greater density of the layout for Harlow with that of Canberra.³ The timing of the project was in response to the urgent need to reduce the housing shortage before the completion of the Administrative Building.

In the Department of Works Canberra office Richard Ure signed the working drawings in May 1954 as Principal Architect, and Bruce Litchfield as Supervising Architect. Ian Slater was responsible for documenting the working drawings.⁴ Richard Ure had won the competition for the design of the Australian-American Memorial in 1950. Ian Slater was later Project Architect for the Canberra Olympic Pool that won the 1956 Sulman Award.⁵

The National Capital Development Commission took over planning of the city in 1958. Since self government of the territory in 1989 the flats have been managed by the ACT Housing Trust.

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

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

The complex of buildings is a good example of Post-War International style design. The buildings exhibit some of the particular architectural elements specific to that style, including cubiform overall shapes and large sheets of glass. The fine proportions, crisp detailing and low scale of these three-storey blocks and their siting aligned with the street pattern have made them architecturally successful. The now-mature trees in and around the courts add to the aesthetic quality of the complex.

Apart from the adjacent eight-storey Currong Apartments, the Northbourne Housing Precinct of 1959-62, designed by Anchor, Mortlock and Murray, is the example of a Post-War International style housing complex in Canberra which most closely compares with Allawah and Bega Courts. The ten-storey Stanhill Flats of 1942-50 in Melbourne, designed by Frederick Romberg, is another comparable Australian example of a housing complex in the style.

(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

The complex is of value for the way it demonstrates the planning and design of, and way of life in, Canberra's first medium density public housing, as Australia emerged from the period of austerity following the Second World War. It is a rare example in Canberra of its architects and planners being influenced in the decade immediately before the 1958 creation of the National Capital Development Commission by designs for English new towns. From that decade University House of 1947-52, the British High Commission of 1953 and the Canberra Olympic Pool of 1953-56 are other notable Canberra buildings influenced by British architecture.

(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

(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

References

- 1 Eric Sparke, Canberra 1954-1980, AGPS, 1988.
- 2 Jim Gibbney, Canberra 1913-1953, AGPS, 1988.
- 3 National Library of Australia Manuscript Collection, Papers of Jim Gibbney MS 1313, Box 30, Planning.

- 4 National Archives of Australia, Aperture Cards of Department of Works Drawings, Early Canberra, Braddon Flats, Microfilm Nos 22382 & 23371 et al.
 - 5 Canberra An Architectural Guide to Australia's Capital, RAIA 1982, page 9.
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Other Information Sources