

# Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

**RSTCA No:** R111

**Name of Place:** Open Systems House

**Other/Former Names:** Churchill House

**Address/Location:** 218 Northbourne Avenue BRADDON ACT 2612  
Block 10 Section 7 of Braddon

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:		Level of Significance:	
Citation Revision No:		Category:	
Citation Revision Date:		Style:	Brutalist

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Date of Design:	1969-70	Designer:	Robin Boyd
Construction Period:	1971	Client/Owner/Lessee:	
Date of Additions:		Builder:	

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## Statement of Significance

Churchill House is a good example of the Late Twentieth Century Brutalist style, (1960-), displaying several key features as follows.

- Large areas of blank wall, especially the west wall of the south wing.
- Off-form concrete, such as the west wall of the south wing and the spandrels to the south and east wings.

In addition, it displays a number of the other features of this style including: sloping structural fins, precast concrete non-loadbearing wall panels, precast fins for sun protection, and vertical slit windows. Churchill House is one of several Canberra examples of this style, and one of only two which display a restrained form reflecting, perhaps, a more conservative approach to the style because of the intended office use.

The architecture of this building may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural Styles

Churchill House has interest for its association with the prominent architect, Robin Boyd. The building was his last major commission.

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## Description

Churchill House was designed by Robin Boyd for the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia in 1969-70 and construction was completed in 1971. The building is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style (1960-) with its large areas of blank wall and off-form concrete.

The complex comprises a number of components: the main building with its east and south wings, the separate north wing or pavilion, the pool and the rear carpark. The main building forms an L shape in plan, and with the north wing it encloses on three sides a courtyard in which the pool is located. The main building is of three storeys with a four storey lift tower at the southeast corner, the north wing is of two storeys, and the carpark is two storeyed.

### Main Building

The main building displays several different elevational treatments. The elevations facing onto the pool area feature floor to ceiling glass with minimal black metal frames to the lowest level, and

precast vertical panels on the upper two storeys. Each panel has a projecting fin and are relatively narrow, with the overall affect being of closely spaced vertical fins. Beside the fins are narrow, slot windows providing minimal outlook onto the pool area.

The south and east elevations are quite different in character having long horizontal sections of flush-mounted glazing set in minimal black metal frames, with timber-textured off-form concrete spandrels between storeys. The base course of the elevation is a large section black-coated steel beam. Several window-mounted airconditioners are located on the south elevation. The blank end walls of the wings and the lift tower are off-form, timber-textured concrete with incised storey lines.

At the junction of the two wings are the foyers for each floor as well as the service core including the lift. Apart from the off-form concrete walls of the service elements, the foyers feature glazing set in black metal frames which extends the full height of the building. At the ground floor level the glazing is vertical but above that for the remaining two storeys it is sloping.

The building has concrete slab floors which are either carpeted or finished in slate. Some interior walls are textured, off-form concrete similar to the exterior. Other walls are lightweight partitions. There is a mixture of ceiling treatments: off-form concrete, suspended ceilings and set plasterboard. Many of the interior fitouts appear relatively modern and are not original.

The roof of the main building is set behind a parapet and appears to be graded concrete with a membrane coating.

#### North Wing

The north wing replaces an earlier pavilion on the same location. The current wing is a two storey structure with a flat metal deck roof set behind a parapet. The wing has an encircling steel colonnade which supports the roof and parapet. The walls are set back from the colonnade and feature flush-mounted glazing set in thin black metal frames, with textured off-form concrete spandrels, similar to the south wall of the south wing. There is an enclosed link between the north and east wings at the ground floor level.

#### Pool Area, Carpark and Landscaping

The pool area is lower than the surrounding site, and being mostly enclosed by the wings, has the quality of a sunken courtyard. The pool area is reached by a large flight of concrete steps from the west, and features a pond which borders a large, raised central island which is reached from one side by a set of bridging steps. The island has concrete paving, garden beds and silver birch trees, and is the location for a large fibreglass statue of Sir Winston Churchill.

The carpark is constructed in off-form concrete, with walls displaying the texture of the timber formwork.

Churchill House has a number of landscape/garden areas. At the front (west) of the building is an open lawn area and either side are mixed native/exotic plantings. The pool area contains numerous trees and shrubs, again of mixed native/exotic species. A small courtyard to the southeast of the main building features bamboo.

#### Stylistic Analysis

Churchill House displays several key features of the Late Twentieth Century Brutalist style as follows.

- Large areas of blank wall, especially the west wall of the south wing.
- Off-form concrete, such as the west wall of the south wing and the spandrels to the south and east wings.

In addition, it displays a number of the other features of this style.

- Sloping structural fins, being the structural steel members supporting the glazing at the corner between the east and south wings.
- Precast concrete non-loadbearing wall panels, being the cladding to the wings facing the pool area.
- Precast fins for sun protection, as above.
- Vertical slit windows, also being a part of the cladding to the wings facing the pool area.

The building generally appears to be in fair to good condition. A number of changes have been made which diminish its integrity including:

- the replacement of the original glass pavilion with the current north wing, albeit with a sympathetic design;
- the non-original window-mounted airconditioners which detract from the south elevation;
- many of the interior fitouts appear to have been modernised; and
- there are a number of non-original surface mounted conduits internally.

None the less, the building retains substantial components and details of the original design.

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### **Condition and Integrity**

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### **Background/History**

Churchill House was built by the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia. The Trust began consideration of erecting a building of its own in 1967 and formed a building committee in 1968. In 1969 it acquired a lease for land on Northbourne Avenue, the current site, and engaged the architect Robin Boyd to design the building.

The building was to provide offices for the Trust and in addition was to provide rental office accommodation for commercial tenants as a means of generating income for the Trust. Features of the original design included:

- a glass exhibition pavilion, on the site of the current north wing, which housed a display on the work of the Trust;
- the flat roof area of the east and south wings which was intended to be a roof terrace; and
- accommodation in the building included a board room, dining room, reception area, bar and kitchen.

The cost of the works was about \$1 million. The building was officially opened on 14 April 1972.

Boyd died in 1971 before completion, and W K Williams was engaged by the Trust as its site representative to replace Boyd.

Robin Boyd CBE HFRAIA (1919-1971) is a noted Australian architect. Boyd was a member of a prominent artistic family, and combined a career as an architect, author and critic (Clerehan 1993). He was strongly influenced by the Modern Movement, and deeply interested in the development of Australian architecture. Boyd is often remembered best for his domestic architecture, as well as his books, but he also produced designs for larger scale works, such as in the case of Churchill House. Boyd was awarded the Gold Medal by the RAI A in 1969, and made an honorary fellow in 1970.

Boyd was strongly influenced later in his career by the post-war concrete architecture produced in Japan (Taylor 1990:80). This Brutalist style is evident in the design for Menzies College Student Housing (1968) and in the design for Churchill House. In this latter phase, Boyd was seeking larger scale projects, although with only limited success.

During the 1990s(?) the glass pavilion was replaced by the current north wing.

Churchill House is one of a number of Canberra buildings designed in the Late Twentieth Century Brutalist style. These include:

- National Gallery of Australia, 1971;
- Cameron Offices, 1976;
- Canberra School of Music, 1976; and
- High Court of Australia, 1980.

Churchill House is an early example in this context, and one of only two examples of an office building. While Brutalism has been described as an ethic rather than an aesthetic (Banham 1966:10), both office buildings display a more restrained form compared to the other buildings, several of which were intended to portray a distinctive image in the national capital.

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### **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*

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*(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*

Churchill House has value for its association with Robin Boyd, a significant figure in the architectural history of Australia. This value is enhanced by Churchill House being his last major commission.

*(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 Churchill House may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural Styles. It can be compared with the other

Canberra examples of Late Twentieth Century Brutalism which are more likely to play a more significant role.

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### References

1. Apperly, R, R Irving and P Reynolds 1989, *Identifying Australia Architecture*, Angus & Robertson.
  2. Banham, R 1966, *The New Brutalism*, Architectural Press, London.
  3. Clerehan, N 1993, 'Robin Gerard Penleigh Boyd' in J Ritchie (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, volume 13, pp 237-240, Melbourne University Press.
  4. Taylor, J 1990, *Australian Architecture since 1960*, RAI.A.
  5. Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia, *Annual Reports* for the calender years ending 1967-71.
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### Other Information Sources