

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R116

Name of Place: Guardian House

Other/Former Names: Woden Canteen/Food Services Building

Address/Location: Bowes Place PHILLIP ACT 2606

Block 61 Section 8 of Phillip

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	March 2002	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation Revision No:	Final	Category:	Government
Citation Revision Date:		Style:	Late 20 th Century Structuralist

Date of Design:	1968-9	Designer:	Ian McKay & Partners
Construction Period:	1969	Client/Owner/Lessee:	NCDC/ACT Government
Date of Additions:		Builder:	Dowsett Engineering

Statement of Significance

Guardian House, the former Woden Canteen, 1969, by Ian McKay and Partners, is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. The single storey building is an excellent example of the Late Twentieth-Century Structuralist Style (1960-) with its long span steel truss, cantilever steel truss, reinforced concrete supporting structure and triangulated boxed plywood beams.

Another characteristic of the style is the way the design of the building takes advantage of the island site to produce a dramatic effect. It also has the complex angular geometry, clearly expressed structure and horizontality of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic Style (1960-), adding to its architectural significance.

The building has strong associations with its architect, Ian McKay, who was awarded the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Canberra Medallion in 1970 for its design. He was influential in the advancement of Australian architecture during the late twentieth century period (1960-), particularly for his buildings in the Sydney Regional, Organic and Structuralist styles.

The building demonstrates the provision of large-scale food services - one aspect of the way of life in the initial decade (1969-79) of use of the offices and shops in Canberra's first satellite town centre, at Woden. Because of its architectural significance, and as it is a rare Canberra example of a large canteen, the building is a valuable educational resource for designers.

Description

The single storey former Woden Canteen was designed by the Sydney firm of Ian McKay and Partners in 1968-69 for the NCDC and construction was completed in 1969 1. The building is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century Structuralist Style (1960) with its long span steel truss, cantilever steel truss, reinforced-concrete supporting structure and triangulated boxed plywood beams 2.

Guardian House is located in the Woden Town Centre to the north of the Woden Town Square. The Woden Town Centre's cruciform urban plan, master planned by the NCDC in 1964 3, has a

dominant north/south lineal axis with development that stretches from the south end large indoor shopping mall, Woden Plaza, and associated car-parking facilities, across the civic square, which is surrounded by commercial buildings including Canberra's tallest office building, Woden Tower, to the north where various multi storeyed public service buildings are situated. There is a secondary less obvious cross axis to the centre that houses community facilities.

The northern office tower precinct is set about a paved outdoor pedestrian mall that extends along the main axis from the civic square to the north linking the Woden Town Centre to the pedestrian office campus. This mall is an ordering volume that, by its continuity, serves to collect, gather and organize the pattern of forms and spaces created by the multi-storey buildings and the outdoor rooms.

Guardian House is significant as the only low level form located along the pedestrian mall. It was placed on the eastern side of the mall, adjacent to landscaped gardens and sitting areas that provided out-door rooms to the office campus. The single storey building is located centrally in the office precinct and contrasts with the surrounding multi-storey office buildings in scale and architectural quality. Some of the office buildings were constructed after the food services building, including Juliana House that is directly to the east.

Guardian House is rectangular in form with a strong dominant metal roof that floats across the full extent of what was the dining hall, folding down on two sides to form covered ways that lead to the entrances. Along the mall elevation the building opens out towards the pathway with extensive glazing between and to the sides of three dominant concrete buttress forms that support a refined steel truss.

The building, covering 930 square metres, consisted of a kitchen block at the rear and a dining area.

The 'floating' roof of the original dining area cantilevers out towards the mall and is constructed of a large number of 24.4 metre long pre-fabricated triangulated plywood beams combined to form a 'folded plate' roof/ceiling structure. The horizontal plane located overhead defines a volume of space between itself and the ground plane. The extension of the roof to the west and the 'U' shaped configuration of implied wall planes defines a volume of space that is orientated towards the open western end out into the landscape of the pedestrian mall.

The plywood beams were fabricated off site from 50x50mm timber framing clad with plywood sheets set staggered along their lengths. The beams are in-turn tied together by the metal deck roof battens forming a one way 'folded plate' structure. The roof spans across the original dining hall supported by and tied down to long span steel trusses at either ends. Originally the plywood soffit was exposed providing a dynamic angled timber ceiling. During the change in use from a canteen to an office space this natural material has been covered over by a low cost suspended ceiling system that has resulted in only the ends of the original roof/ceiling structure now being visible.

Refined lightweight long span parallel cord boxed trusses fabricated from 30mm SHS 'AUS-10 50' 5 extend across the two ends of the building. The trusses allow a high degree of visual and spatial continuity between the indoor and outdoor spaces. Functionally the truss system provides five important functions. The truss(es):

- support the light weight roof with vertical struts extending from the top cords and tie the roof back to the supporting structure giving the impression of the roof floating above its supports,
- cantilever out at the ends to support the roof as it turns down over the entry corridors,
- extend along the front at a level above the occupants eye level to allowing the use of frameless sliding glazing that extends the full width between each concrete buttress thus negating the need for structural mullions and providing unobstructed views to the outside,
- support the fixed glazing with framing members fabricated from the same 30mm SHS providing a homogenous detail,
- support the front angled sun shading glass.

The special 'AUS-10 50' steel enables the steel members of the trusses and glazing framing to form a predetermined rust coating that prevents further oxidization occurring and thus provides a finish that requires no maintenance.

The triangular form of the roof/ceiling structure is continued as a design theme through the building in the various glazing and concrete elements. The glazing in part is set at an angle mirroring the truss bracing and projecting the lower level glazing forward of the line of the truss. The concrete buttresses and the low level concrete wall are in-turn set at the same angle providing an emphatic form within the design theme. The angling enables the building to both appear to extend out into the landscaped mall and at the same time prevent people from standing up against the perimeter glazing, thus providing a degree of privacy by extending the personal space of the occupants of the building.

There are two main entrances to Guardian House. The building can be approached off the mall along the northern and southern ends under the folded down sides of the main roof. The recessed entries provide shelter and receive a portion of the exterior space into the realm of the building helping to provide a transition from the public mall to the semi-public original dining area. The entries are given emphasis with the lower roof providing protection from the weather as well as the cantilevered concrete gutters that extend out from the outer low-level walls to enclose the entry points. These gutters, set at a low level, direct the public towards the entries. They are set below the edge of the roof allowing a gap so that when it rains the water run-off from the roof can be seen and heard.

The steel framed glazing extends the full length of the entry passages with the steel frame continuing up as struts to support the angled roof over.

A terrazzo sill extends the perimeter of the glazing and the framed glazing is set in rubberized "Zipper" gaskets.⁶

On entering what was the original dining area there is now plain office and storage space divided by partitions. The original dining space allowed for 500 diners with the servery located along the rear centre of the space and the beverage counter to the south of the servery. ⁷

The eastern end service section of the building by contrast is constructed in load bearing brickwork. It contained the former kitchen, servery and toilets. The load-bearing brickwork has been detailed thoughtfully and exhibits technical skill. There are simple plays with differing materials on a small scale. The reinforced concrete roof is constructed of lightweight concrete. To provide natural light to the service areas, the slab is turned up in places at an angle matching the design theme with the frameless glazing set as an angled highlight. The concrete steps down to form edge beams that are then cut out to allow windows that extend halfway between the brickwork and the concrete.

Condition and Integrity

The major change to the interior has been the introduction of a false ceiling and the replacement of the clear glazing with opaque glazing to the underside of the roof, which has detracted from its original floating roof form. The building has been added to with a brick change room and toilet block on the northern side.

Background/History

The Woden satellite city was planned with a city centre to accommodate a large work force of public servants with related cultural and commercial facilities. With the construction of office buildings in Canberra's first satellite town centre at Woden in 1968-71, there were more than 10,000 people employed in both government and private-enterprise offices. The NCDC saw the need for canteen facilities to provide for the public servants where there were no cafes or restaurants and arranged for what was initially described as the Food Services Building to be built. This facility was to support and reinforce the social values held then that it was important that a proper facility was provided for the convenience and better work conditions of the Canberra work force. ⁸

The brief called for a canteen to seat 500 people with associated kitchen and stores and facilities for counter service of food and drinks. In addition, the kitchen area was to be closed off with shutters so that the building could be used for meetings and social functions during the evenings.

The site was planned to be surrounded by high-rise office buildings and this building was designed to provide a small-scale pavilion, using natural finish materials as far as possible as a contrast to the surrounding development. 9

Light fittings and heaters were originally suspended from the timber roof trusses in plywood troughs on stainless steel wiring. The floor of the canteen is a concrete slab covered originally with vinyl tiles, and all brick and concrete walls internally were originally left with their natural finish.¹⁰

The plywood roof system was influenced by the work of Jorn Utzon, when he designed his own un-built residence in Sydney whilst working on his Sydney Opera House.¹¹ Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the use of materials to get the most for the least from a structural system was a major design theme of modern architecture. The triangulated plywood beams were prefabricated in Sydney and transported to Canberra by rail. The construction system proved to be more economical than traditional systems and the off-site prefabrication of the major structural members provided a considerable advantage in construction time. 12

The AUS-10 50 steel in the trusses was developed in the USA for the use on railway coal cars and marketed there as Cor-ten. Only a few buildings have been designed in Australia using the material, BHP Research Laboratory Offices, 1969, Burwood Council Chambers 1970, Centrepoint Tower 1981, BHP House Melbourne 1972. 13 Guardian House is the only known example in Canberra and is one of the earliest in Australia. At the time of designing BHP was to provide the steel, however, at the time of fabrication BHP was not able to provide this new innovative steel and instead sourced it from Japan. 14

Architects who designed buildings in the Late Twentieth Century Structuralist Style were determined to get the most for the least from a structural system. They used new materials and generally extended the materials capabilities to new extents. By their very nature buildings in this style often served specific functions and looked exciting and different with their roofs often designed to 'float' above the site.¹⁵

The architect Ian McKay graduated from the NSW University of Technology (which later became the University of NSW) in 1954. After establishing his own practice he shared an office for a while with Bruce Rickard and became associated with Adrian Snodgrass, Albert Read and Peter Muller. Their influence and McKay's early exposure to the philosophies of Frank Lloyd Wright and the East strongly conditioned his attitudes and consequently his career. He joined Philip Cox in partnership in 1963 when Cox was commissioned to design the St Andrews Presbyterian College, Leppington, NSW and the C. B. Alexander Presbyterian Agricultural College, Tocal near Paterson, NSW. The colleges, in the Late Twentieth-Century Sydney Regional style, are interesting buildings as highly successful, large scale works in the romantic idiom and for the combination of the vigour of McKay with the sensitivity of Cox. 16 The architects jointly won the RAI NSW Chapter's prestigious Sir John Sulman award for excellence in architecture in 1963 and 1965 for those colleges.

McKay designed what was then the Food Services Building in 1968-9 while practising as Ian McKay & Partners. After its completion he was awarded the 1970 Canberra Medallion for Meritorious Architecture by the ACT Chapter of the RAI for its design. This is the highest possible award for architecture in the ACT. In common with other architects designing in the Late Twentieth-Century Structuralist style, it shows his delight in the structural capabilities of new materials.

It also has the complex angular geometry, clearly expressed structure and horizontality of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style of architecture, in which McKay was a key practitioner. In that style, his most dramatic building, the David Moore Vacation House at Lobster Bay was designed in 1973. 17 He was awarded the RAI ACT Chapter C. S. Daley Medallion for residential projects for his Late Twentieth-Century Sydney Regional style housing in Barnett Close, Swinger Hill in 1977. In the late seventies McKay closed his office and searched for a more relaxing and less materially oriented existence. His individualism found an outlet in northern NSW, where he built his own house in 1978. He returned to Sydney in 1980.

The former Woden Canteen is one of few comparable examples of its type in Canberra, the only others being the Russell Canteen, (now converted to a child care centre) at the Russell Defence Group Offices and the canteen (now unused) at the ANZAC Parade Portal Buildings. The former Woden Canteen has additional significance compared with the other canteens for its architectural

qualities. With the provision of numerous cafes and more intimate restaurants in the Woden Town Centre, the building has not been used for its original purpose for many years. It has been converted into a government records management centre, renamed Guardian House.

Comparisons with other Canberra examples of the Late Twentieth-Century Structuralist style buildings are interesting. Sir Roy Grounds roofed the Australian Academy of Science headquarters of 1958 using a dome with a ring of arches cut into it, and for the Canberra Stadium 1977 and the National Indoor Stadium of 1981 Philip Cox used elegant cable-suspended structures. These buildings differ markedly from McKay's geometrical structure under a flat-topped roof, but all three examples of the style show delight in the structural capabilities of new materials.

The structural engineers were Ove Arup and Partners and it was built by Dowsett Engineering Pty Ltd.

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 innovative design of the canteen building in 1969 using 24.4 metre long fabricated triangular plywood beams combined to form a 'folded plate' roof/ceiling system are of unusual construction and demonstrated a high degree of creative achievement at that time. The roof system is believed to be one of the only types in Australia where plywood has been engineered to roof such a large space. The trusses have a delicate complexity. The incorporation of 'AUS-10 50' steel in the lightweight long span parallel cord boxed trusses represented new technology at the time. The use of 'AUS-10 50' in this building is believed to be one of the first examples of and is a rare example of its use in Australia. The choice of this finish has resulted in the steel being maintenance free.

Both the trusses and the plywood roof/ceiling make the most out of the least materials.

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

The former Woden Canteen exhibits many of the particular characteristics of the Late Twentieth-Century Structuralist Style (1960-) with its long span steel truss, cantilever steel truss, reinforced concrete supporting structure and triangulated boxed plywood beams. The building is included as such in Apperly et al, Style book (p259).

Another characteristic of the style is the way the design of the building takes advantage of the island site to produce a dramatic effect. This effect extends into the interior with diaphanous planes of angled glazing contrasting sharply with a crimped ceiling and emphatic supports. The authors of *Identifying Australian Architecture - Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present* regard this building as a key example of this style of architecture, and used a photograph of it to illustrate the style indicators. The building also has the complex angular geometry, clearly expressed structure and horizontality of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style, adding to its architectural significance.

The building was advanced for its time, its planning is well done and is held in high regard by the RAI A for its architectural excellence, the ACT Chapter of the RAI A having awarded its the 1970 Canberra Medallion for its design.

(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 use of canteens for public servants was an integral part of Commonwealth office development in the 1970s and 1980s. This building demonstrates the provision of large-scale food services - one aspect of the way of life at this time of use of the offices and shops in Canberra's first satellite

town centre, at Woden. All the small number of canteens built have since been changed for other purposes, however, they remain as reminders and part of that way of life and custom.

(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

The building is one of Canberra's few comparable examples of a large canteen of the 1960s, the others being the Russell Canteen, (now converted to a child care centre) at the Russell Defence Group Offices and the canteen (now unused) at the ANZAC Parade Portal Buildings. The designs of those buildings are simpler, with less of the architectural complexity or character possessed by Guardian House. It is believed to be the only small scale non-residential structuralist building in Canberra of this quality.

(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

The building has strong associations with its architect, Ian McKay, who was awarded the RAI A Canberra Medallion in 1970 for its design. He was influential in the advancement of Australian architecture during the late twentieth century period (1960-90), particularly for his buildings in the Sydney Regional, Organic and Structuralist styles. Philip Cox, one of Australia's eminent architects described him as "highly talented". 11

(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 and as it is a rare Canberra example of a large canteen, the building is a valuable educational resource for designers. The structural systems employed are excellent examples of important themes prevalent at the time in the education of design. As the winner of Canberra's highest architectural award, the Canberra Medallion, it provides information about technology, design and custom of the time.

References

- 1 RAI A ACT Chapter, *An Architectural Guide To Australia's Capital*. RAI A
- 2 Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds, *Identifying Australian Architecture - Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. Angus and Robertson, 1989.
- 3 Opcit Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds.
- 4 Conversation with Ian McKay.
- 5 *Architecture in Australia*, RAI A journal, April, 1971.
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Conversation with Michael Grace, then with the NCDC.
- 9 Opcit *Architecture Australia*.

- 10 Ibid.
 - 11 Conversation with Ian McKay.
 - 12 Opcit *Architecture Australia*.
 - 13 Alan Ogg, *Architecture in Steel – The Australian Context*. RAI A 1987.
 - 14 Conversation with Ian McKay.
 - 15 Opcit Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds.
 - 16 Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, RAI A, 1990.
 - 17 Opcit Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds.
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Other Information Sources