



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

St Joseph's Catholic Church

(part Block 1 Section 78, O'Connor)

At its meeting of 6 April 2017 the ACT Heritage Council decided that St Joseph's Catholic Church is eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for St Joseph's Catholic Church against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

The information in this background document has been drawn primarily from documents supplied by the nominator – the Australian Institute of Architects – to the ACT Heritage Council in 2016. For information further to this, including additional reference material/details, the Australian Institute of Architects should be contacted.

HISTORY

(See glossary below for definitions on ecclesiastical architecture)

O'Connor is a north Canberra suburb developed soon after the Second World War, with a site for a Catholic church, convent and school (Gibney 1988: 250). In 1955 the foundation stone for a primary school was laid (the Canberra Times 1955). Sisters of St Joseph moved from Goulburn in January 1956 to staff the school, which was opened in May 1956 (the Canberra Times 1956a, 1956b). By then, church services were being held in the convent school hall, described as St Joseph's, O'Connor, in the Parish of St Patrick, Braddon (the Canberra Times 1956c). St Joseph's O'Connor was formally established as a parish in 1959. The first parish priest, Father William O'Shea, did not take up his post until 1961. Father Lloyd Reynolds served as administrator in the interim (John Monaghan, public consultation submission 2016).

With the growing congregation needing a new church, Father O'Shea engaged the architects and consulting engineers Kevin J. Curtin & Partners for the project. A design was produced in 1971 and documentation followed in 1972. Curtin seized the opportunity provided by the Second Vatican Council's embrace of modern architectural design for Catholic churches following changes to liturgical practices (Goad 2012).

In 1972 Harry Clarke Stained Glass Ltd, founded by Ireland's greatest stained glass artist, Harry Clarke (1899-1931) was commissioned by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) to supply two windows for St Joseph's Catholic Church, which were installed in 1973 (NCDC 1980; Costigan and Cullen 2010).

Construction of the church was complete in 1973, funded by donations and the proceeds from a lottery won by parishioners (Larkins 2009).

A Parish centre was built between the church and Boronia Drive in 1986, to a design by Munns Sly & Associates, with meeting and reading rooms. Damage to St Joseph's Catholic Church resulted from a fire lit by an arsonist in August 2007. Much of the roof was destroyed as the fire went up through the tower, which acted as a chimney, but the pews, stained glass and most of the artwork was left untouched, as was the crucifix at the altar, and the reredos. Kevin Curtin's original drawings were used to completely restore the church. The restoration respected the original design and retained the fabric as much as possible. The adjacent Parish Centre, also much damaged by the fire, was demolished (Akhurst 2008). After being closed for nearly two years, the church was reopened on the Feast Day of St

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Joseph, 19 March 2009 (Larkins 2009).

The church and parish have supported chaplains for various migrant communities, including Polish, Dutch, Croatian, Irish, and Vietnamese in the early decades of their settlement in Canberra. From October 2016, the parish facilities are being shared with the Syro Malabar Communities from India (John Monaghan, public consultation submission 2016).

St Joseph Catholic Church’s architect, Kevin Joseph Curtin, was born in Murrumburrah, NSW in 1924. His family moved to Queanbeyan, where Kevin and his twin brother Leo Patrick (known as Patrick) attended St Gregory’s Primary School, then to Ainslie in 1940. Kevin completed his education at Canberra High School, and became a clerk in the Public Service, as did Patrick. On turning 18 they enlisted in the RAAF in 1943 and served as navigators of Lancaster bombers over Germany. Patrick had vowed to pursue a career in architecture after the Second World War, but was killed in action in 1945. Kevin returned to Australia determined to fulfil his brother’s ambition (Barnard 1996).

He became an Associate of the RIAA in 1951, and established the Curtin and Cameron practice in Sydney 1953. He was so well regarded in the profession that he was a member of the jury for the Sulman Medal in 1954 and was made a Fellow in 1970 (SMH 1954).

Curtin’s affiliation with the Catholic Church eventually led to commissions for more than 50 churches and over 200 schools. For these, he was awarded a Papal Medal (Barnard 1996).

He designed some remarkable churches, particularly St Bernard’s, Botany (1954) said to be Australia’s first church with a parabolic roof, reminiscent of the contemporary thin shell structures of the Mexican architect Felix Candela (HERCON Consulting 2013).

Other notable churches he designed included St Monica’s, North Parramatta (1960) with a nine-bay A-frame roof (University of Melbourne 1961) and Marist Brothers Chapel, Kogarah (1961), a two-storey circular chapel and assembly hall with a radiating pre-cast concrete folded-plate roof.

By the early 1960s his practice had been renamed Kevin J. Curtin & Partners. When the Dominican Order in Australia resolved in 1960 to set up its headquarters in the Canberra suburb of Watson, the Irish architect and Dominican Father Bonaventure Leahy designed a complex with a Dominican Sisters Convent and teachers training college and a Dominican priests’ house of theology. Kevin Curtin was engaged to collaborate with Father Leahy and building began in 1961 (ACG 2013).

Curtin designed the Queanbeyan Leagues Club in 1963. This and other projects, such as Queanbeyan RSL Club and the Queanbeyan Bowling Club prompted him to open a Canberra branch of his Sydney-based practice in 1964 (the Canberra Times 1963).

In that year Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic churches and a presbytery were designed by the firm for Jindabyne in the New South Wales Snowy Mountains. At the Australian National University, Curtin designed the John XXIII College and the Chapel of St John the Evangelist, the first chapel on the campus. They opened in 1969, the same year as Curtin’s Yowani Country Club in Lyneham. Other clubs designed by Curtin include Canberra Southern Cross Club (1972) and the Canberra Royals Club (1975) (Robert Sly pers. comm. to Ken Charlton April 2016).

Canberra schools designed by Curtin include Canberra Catholic Girls High School, now Merici College, Braddon (1959), St John Vianney’s Primary School, Warramanga (1971), St Matthew’s Catholic Primary School, Page (1971), St Francis Xavier Catholic High School, Florey, (1976) and Padua Catholic High School, Wanniasa (1978) (The Canberra Times 1974 and Robert Sly pers. comm. to Ken Charlton April 2016).

Curtin’s greatest legacies to Canberra are St Joseph’s Catholic Church, and, in association with Ernest Munns, Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Curtin (1975).

A notable and prominent example of Curtin’s architecture in Canberra is the former ACT TAB, now TransACT, brick office tower and annex on Northbourne Avenue, Dickson (1975-78) (the Canberra Times 1975 and 1978).

In July 1977 the architectural and engineering practice of Kevin J. Curtin and Partners Pty Ltd in Canberra was purchased by Ernest Munns and Robert Sly to become Munns, Sly and Associates Pty Ltd (the Canberra times 1977).

Sly was a newcomer, but Ernest Munns had managed Curtin’s Canberra office for some time. Curtin’s final project

before retiring was the St Mary’s Cathedral School, Cardinal and Priests’ residence in Sydney (1992). He died in 1996, aged 71. His career spanned four decades and included the design of an extraordinary range of buildings; notably church, civic, schools and hospitality architecture (Barnard 1996).

The churches Kevin Curtin designed before the mid 1960s, before the second Vatican Council (1962-5) introduced changes to the Mass of the Roman Rite which usually had traditional rectangular plans. The decision of the Vatican Council regarding the planning of churches was that face-the-people orientation was to be made possible by having a centralised sanctuary. For masses to be celebrated with the priests facing the people, altars were to be built separate from walls, in such a way that it would be possible to walk around them easily.

The first opportunity in Canberra for Kevin Curtin to plan in this way came from the Dominican Fathers, for him to design St John the Evangelist Chapel at the ANU’s John XXIII College. The chapel, designed in early 1967 and completed in 1969, broke away from the traditional rectangle with a square nave, entered through a corner narthex.

In this chapel, the congregation faces a free-standing altar in the sanctuary near the opposite corner. Daylight enters the nave via a central skylight under a squat spire, and through obscure glass walls each side of the entrance. A small side chapel, confessionals and sacristies complete the plan. Four triangular timber-boarded ceiling panels with extensive perimeter indirect lighting accentuate the square plan. The exterior, with manganese brick walls, concrete colonnades and a square hipped blue/black glazed tile roof blends well with its setting (GML 2014). Its interior form, albeit more modest and square rather than circular, is similar that of St Joseph’s.

Holy Trinity Catholic Church (1975) in Curtin, was designed by Kevin Curtin in 1971 in association with Ernest Munns (Robert Sly pers. comm. to Ken Charlton April 2016) concurrently with St Joseph’s. Like St Joseph’s Catholic Church (see p. 4), it is an example of the radical stream of church design of Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style (1960-) as per Apperly et al 1994, this time with cream brick external walls and glazed terra-cotta tiled roofing.

The form is also based on geometry, but that of a pyramid, with substantial smaller pyramids attached on each side. As the relationship of the smaller pyramids to the larger appears awkward, and the site is less open, the composition is not as successful as that of St Joseph’s. The spatial quality of the interior is quite unusual. The entrance via the corner narthex leads down a central aisle to the sanctuary, located near the congregation by virtue of generous transepts in the other two corners of the major triangle. There is no reredos – in its place is a triangular chapel behind the sanctuary. Here, and in the transepts, are narrow vertical windows for daylight, which also enters under the eaves and floods the interior through a central skylight. Two stained glass windows are by the notable artist David Saunders (RAIA 1982).

The smaller triangles each side of the narthex, housing the necessary ancillary spaces, are entered externally and slightly intrude into the triangular nave.

Contemporaneous, comparable examples to St Joseph’s, Holy Trinity Catholic Church, and St John the Evangelist Chapel include:

- Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Turner (built 1961). Registered on the ACT Heritage Register, designed by Frederick Romberg of Grounds Romberg and Boyd. The Holy Trinity Lutheran Church is significant for its strong associations with the Lutheran church and particularly the Finnish community who migrated to Australia after the Second World War when the eastern part of Finland was annexed by the then USSR. The church is also significant as a rare and well-preserved and early example of the 1960s Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style of architecture (ACT Heritage Council 2008). The building is listed on the Australian Institute of Architects’ Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (Entry R074).

Its setting and design have produced a building of integrity, representing the ideal of innovative modern architecture and planning; clean, functional, uncluttered and well sited. The church is of importance as the earliest and most accomplished in Canberra reflecting this modern ideal and because it is the work of one of Australia’s important architects Frederick Romberg. This significance is widely recognised by professional bodies and architecture critics in listings and publications on significant architecture. The church design still fulfils its original purpose, remaining sound yet innovative (ACT Heritage Council 2008).

- Canberra National Seventh Day Adventist Church, Turner (built 1971). Nominated to the ACT Heritage Register, designed by Ken Woolley of Ancher Mortlock & Woolley. Captures key elements of the Late

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Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style (1960–) such as clerestory windows, rectangular plan shape, plain wall surfaces, emphasis on verticality, and glazing with vertically proportioned panes (AIA 2001).

In 1996 the church was awarded the ACT Chapter of the RIAA Twenty Five Year Award in recognition of the architectural significance of the building when designed and that the building has continued, over the twenty five year period to demonstrate its architectural qualities (AIA 2001). The building is listed on the Australian Institute of Architects’ Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (R114).

Elements of this style in the Signadou building are expressed in the inverted V shape of the window openings, which are reminiscent of the Gothic pointed arch, and the vertical emphasis of the window openings in reference to medieval forms. Blackfriars, too, employs a vertical motif in its repetition of high window openings, although these finish in arches, as opposed to inverted Vs (see Image 9). The buildings also demonstrate glazing with vertically proportioned panes. In addition, the open, central courtyards and octagonal shaped buildings may have been designed in tribute to the distinctive building type preferred by the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical Style (1960-), where buildings generated dramatic manipulations of shape and space (Apperly et al 1994).

- Holy Cross Anglican Church, Hackett (built 1967). Designed by Luker Thompson and Goldsmith. This place is not listed on the ACT Heritage Register, but demonstrates key aspects of the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style (1960–). These include a vertical spire, rectangular plan-shape, plain wall surfaces, and glazing with vertically proportioned panes.

Other significant ecclesiastical buildings in the ACT include:

- Shakespeare Hall, Braddon, (registered, formerly the Presbyterian Hall in Ainslie)
- St Andrew’s Church Precinct, Forrest (registered)
- St Christopher’s Cathedral Precinct, Forrest (registered)
- St Paul’s Anglican Church, Griffith (registered)
- Reid Uniting Church (registered)
- St John the Baptist Church and Churchyard, Reid (registered)
- All Saints Church, Ainslie (registered)
- Wesley Uniting Church Complex, Forrest (nominated)

However, the examples listed above are not directly comparable with St Joseph’s Catholic Church. Shakespeare Hall, St Andrew’s, St Christopher’s, St Paul’s and Uniting Church, Reid were constructed decades earlier than 1973, in distinctly different styles. These earlier buildings have significant associations with the *Church Lands Lease Ordinance 1924*. This established that each religious denomination with a presence in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was exempt from taking a 99 year lease, and granted a single lease at peppercorn rental in perpetuity, with a view to ensuring the spiritual needs of the population of the FCT would be met.

St John the Baptist Church and Churchyard originated in the 1840s, and is significant for its associations with early pastoral life on the Limestone Plains. All Saints Church was constructed in 1868, and is recognised as a fine example of the Gothic revival style of architecture.

DESCRIPTION

St Joseph’s Catholic Church is on a site with a northern frontage along Boronia Drive, O’Connor, and is adjacent to St Joseph’s Catholic Primary School and Convent. Other site boundaries are along Macarthur Avenue to the south and Hovea Street to the west. The circular building sits on a square platform, around which are uncoursed bluestone retaining and balustrade walls, built by Croatian craftsmen. The church has a generous setback on all three street frontages, with generous landscaping on these sides, and a carpark on its eastern side (see Image 1). The ground plan can be interpreted as the embodiment of the external outline of a Celtic Cross (John Monaghan, public consultation submission 2016).

St Joseph’s Catholic Church is an example of a building in the radical stream of church design of the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical Style (1960-). This style was characterised by a shift in architecture away from the heavily symbolic rituals of the past towards a focus on the preacher space and the ‘minister of the word.’ It saw the

continuation and extension of post-war religious architecture principally for Roman Catholic and Protestant denominations. There was a tendency to create new plan-shapes reflecting the move away from past symbolic rituals with this style. A departure from medieval forms permitted freer forms of expression, but vertical emphasis persisted in this style, which was adopted Australia-wide (Apperly et al 1994: 231).

St Joseph’s Catholic Church demonstrates the style because of its circular plan-shape (see Image 2) responding to liturgical changes, but also due to the emphasised verticality culminating in its tower and spire (see Image 3). The tower is topped by a Celtic Cross. In a most innovative way, Kevin Curtin solved the problem of roofing the building. As a result, the church has another characteristic of the style: the dramatic manipulation of shape and space (Apperly et al 1994). Internally, the circular nave is kept free of potentially intrusive ancillary spaces by locating these in projecting wings. The generous sanctuary has allowed the altar to be located well towards the centre of the circle, close to the people. The arrangement of the nave ceiling to reflect the unusual roof shapes is particularly effective (see Image 4). A striking attribute of the interior is its stained glass, in four large wall panels and on the underside of the tower, where daylight is focussed brilliantly at the centre of the nave and on the altar (see Image 5). St Joseph’s Catholic Church is the most outstanding building by Kevin Curtin in Canberra.

Four wings, with walls and sloping buttresses of matching stonework, project beyond the circle towards the corners of the square. The main entrance is via the north-west narthex wing, on the axis of the nave and sanctuary (see Image 6). On the south-east corner, behind the reredos of the sanctuary, are the sacristy and work sacristy.

The church can also be entered via a porch on the north-east corner between rooms for the parish office and Saint Vincent de Paul. A porch on the south-west corner is a third entrance, between toilets and pairs of confessionals. The four walls of the nave between the wings consist of panels of stained glass.

The pitched roof of the church, clad in bronze-coloured ribbed steel decking, has four kite-shaped elements which slope up from the corners of the square to a square pyramidal tower surmounted by a tall metal cross.

The roof over the narthex projects further than the other three roof elements, to provide a port-cochere (see Image 7). Glazing at the apex and narrow central panels on each side of the tower allow daylight into the centre of the church and through stained glass ceiling panels under the tower. Internally, the nave has pews facing the sanctuary, which is stepped up on two levels (see Image 8). On the upper level is the altar, well forward of the timberscreen reredos (see Image 9) with carvings of the rosary and a raised central section with a carved wooden crucifix. A passage behind the reredos leads to the sacristies.

On the lower level of the sanctuary are the font, pulpit and blessed sacrament. The stained glass panels flanking the sanctuary are predominantly blue on the east and red on the south. Within the eastern panel are the two windows from Ireland made by Harry Clarke Stained Glass Ltd, "The Annunciation and St Joseph" and "The Young Christ" (see Images 10 and 11). Reportedly, these windows were a considered choice of the (then) Irish Parish Priest (John Monaghan, public consultation submission 2016).) The ceiling of the nave has timber boarding between the four stained glass walls and the tower, while grey painted plaster sheeting lines the remainder of the nave ceiling, reflecting the kite-shaped roof elements.

The building is a significant architectural expression of the liturgy of the Catholic Church. It was designed to comply with a key element of the church's doctrine which arose from the Second Vatican Council: a centralised sanctuary. The generous sanctuary has allowed the altar to be located well towards the centre of the circle, close to the people. A sliver of "Mass Rock" from County Kerry is embedded in the marble top of the altar (John Monaghan, public consultation submission 2016).

The innovative design of the interior and the structure of the church, roofed by origami-like folded planes projecting dramatically in four directions, demonstrate a high degree of creative achievement for the late twentieth century which compares well with religious buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright.

Influence of Frank Lloyd Wright

In its information supplied to the ACT Heritage Council, drawing on Peter Blake’s 1960 volume, *Frank Lloyd Wright Architecture and Space*, the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) included an analysis of the influences of Frank Lloyd Wright’s designs in aspects of the design of St Joseph’s Catholic Church.

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Kevin Curtin was breaking away from traditional church design in 1971 in a similar way the Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) had been for several decades prior to his death. In his later years, Wright discovered that a hexagonal, diamond-shaped, or triangular module might work almost as well as a square one, and produce a greater variety of spaces. Curtin used a triangular module at Holy Trinity Church, Curtin, but the plan of St Joseph’s Catholic Church, O’Connor is circular (see Image 2) and the shape of its roof is comparable to the roofs of some of Wright’s churches.

Wright’s Florida Southern College buildings from 1938 onwards, with their suggestion of folded planes, were part of his attempt to get away from boxlike architecture. For example, the William H. Danforth Chapel (1954-5) was designed by Wright with a prow-like front protected by a pointed roof projecting dramatically forward. Wright also developed the motif of a prow-like front with a folded roof in his Madison Unitarian Church (1947-51), Wisconsin. Compare these two examples with the exterior of St Joseph’s (see Images 12 to 17).

In the Auditorium at the Madison Unitarian Church, Wright created a diamond-shaped space with a sense of enclosure, lit from various unexpected sources. The ceiling’s graceful curves suggest, in Wright’s words, “the wings of a bird in flight.” The pews are arranged to allow parishioners to face each other as well as the minister, to enhance a sense of community. The lighting, ceiling shapes and pew arrangement all have similarities with St Joseph’s. Externally, the roof at Madison Unitarian Church is composed of origami-like folded planes, meant to represent hands raised in prayer, with a peak above the prow. The similarity to origami is apparent in the roof of St Joseph’s. It projects dramatically in four directions, but to a greater extent over the entrance. Both churches have stone bases, integrating them with their sites. Curtin chose the same uncoursed bluestone he had seen at the Signadou and Blackfriars Precinct, Watson.

Physical condition and integrity

In 1992, the windows of St Joseph’s Church required restoration work, and were re-leaded and re-framed. Whilst the frame profile did not change, the new frames were of a new colour and material. However, these works did not diminish the heritage fabric of the place.

The church sustained damage as a result of a fire lit by an arsonist in August 2007. Most of the roof was destroyed as the fire went up through the tower, which acted as a chimney, but the pews, stained glass and much of the artwork was left untouched. Kevin Curtin’s original drawings were used to completely restore the church. The restoration respected the original design and retained the fabric as much as possible. The adjacent Parish Centre, also much damaged by the fire, was demolished (Akhurst 2008). After being closed for nearly two years, the church was reopened on the Feast Day of St Joseph, 19 March 2009 (Larkins 2009).

The church is well maintained and in good condition since its restoration in 2009. The original light brown coloured steel roof was replaced in the restoration with bronze-coloured steel.

Glossary of Ecclesiastical Architecture (after McNamara 2011)

Altar: a ceremonial table for the celebration of sacrifice and feast.

Buttress: a projecting unit for strengthening a wall.

Confessional: a small, enclosed booth used for the Sacrament of Penance (Catholic).

Font: Vessel for water used for baptisms.

Narthex: antechamber or large porch.

Nave: the section of the church reserved for the congregation.

Porte Cochere: a covered entrance usually large enough for vehicles to pass through, typically opening into a courtyard.

Pulpit: a raised enclosed platform in a church or chapel from which the preacher delivers a sermon

Reredos: the superstructure at the back of an altar containing images.

Sacristy: a chapel-like room in a church used for preparation for services and storage of sacred vessels.

Sanctuary: the place of sacred action in a church. Depending upon denomination, it may be reserved to the area around the altar or encompass the entire church interior.

Spire: a slender, tapering finish to a church tower, sometimes called a steeple.

Transept: the arm of a cross-shape church.

SITE PLAN



St Joseph's Catholic Church (part Block 1 Section 78 O'Connor)

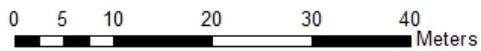


Image 1 Site Boundary, St Joseph’s Catholic Church, O’Connor

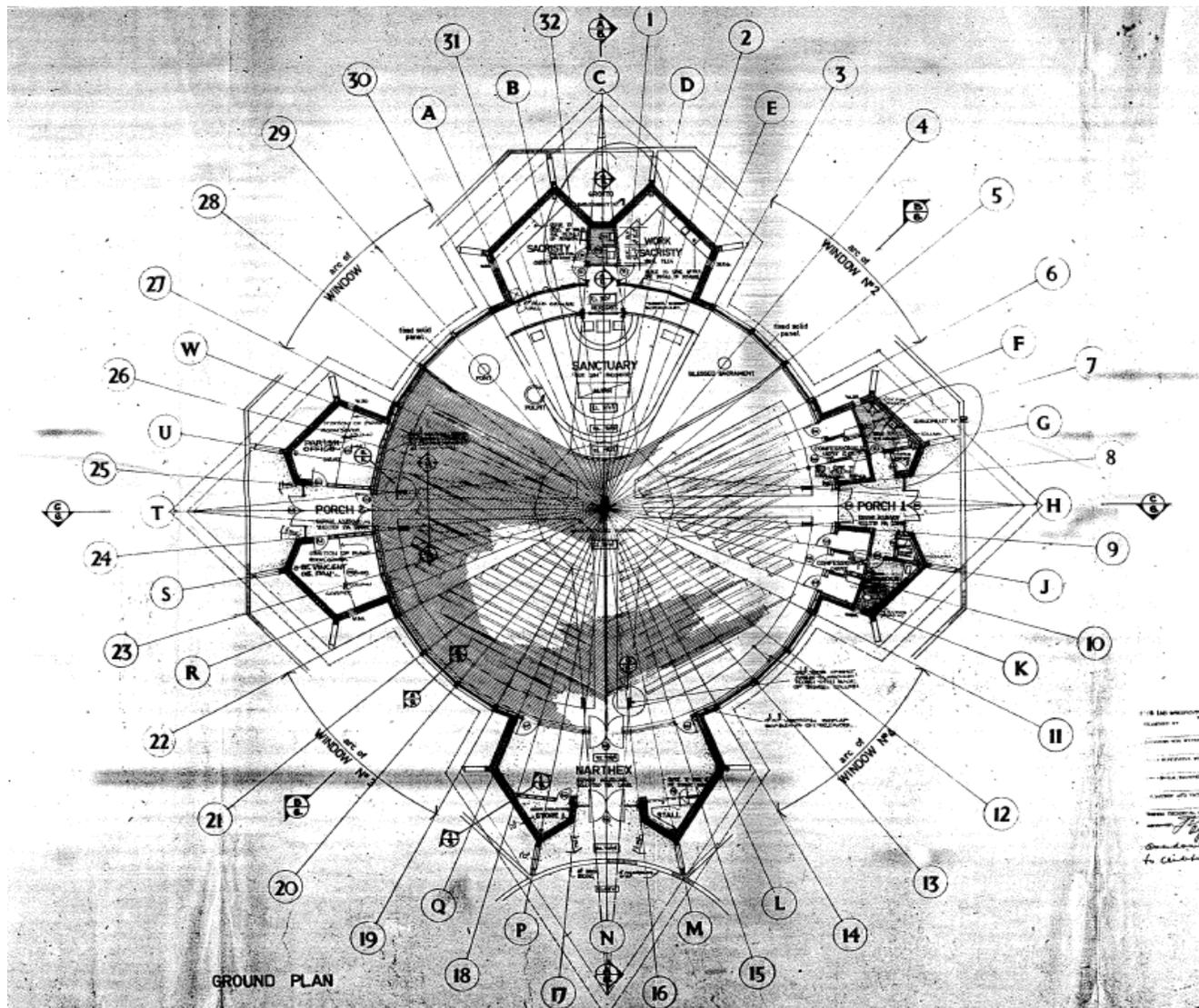


Image 2 Curtin's original plan of St Joseph's Church, image supplied by nominator



Image 3 Tower, spire and roof folds of St Joseph's Catholic Church (ACT Heritage 2016)

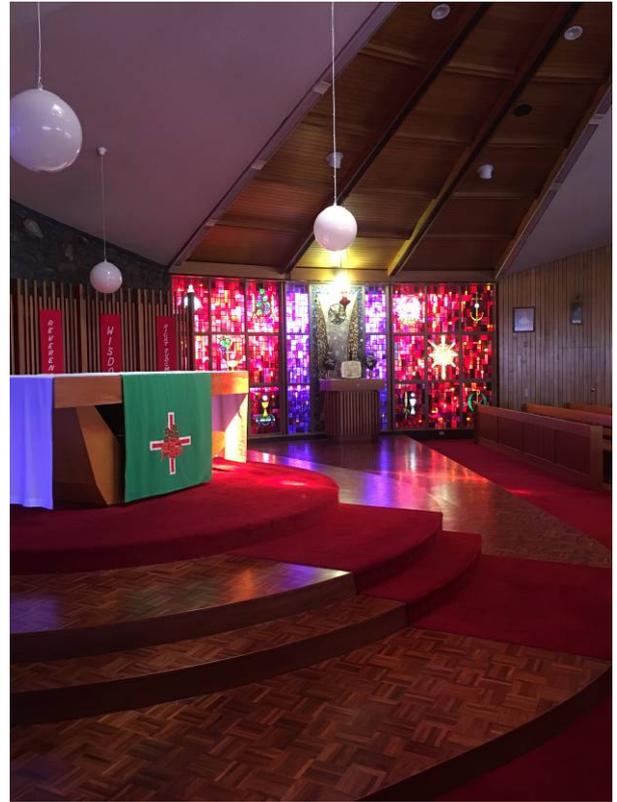


Image 5 Sunlight illuminating the sanctuary and nave (ACT Heritage 2016).



Image 4 Dramatic manipulation of space in the ceiling space (ACT Heritage 2016).



Image 6 Sanctuary – nave – narthex axis inside St Joseph's Catholic Church (ACT Heritage 2016).



Image 7 Port-Cochere. Main entrance (ACT Heritage 2016)



Image 8 Elevated sanctuary (ACT Heritage 2016)



Image 9 Carved reredos (ACT Heritage 2016).



Image 10 One of two windows by Harry Clarke Stained Glass Ltd (ACT Heritage 2016)



Image 11 One of two windows by Harry Clarke Stained Glass Td (ACT Heritage 2016)



Image 12 Lloyd Wright's William H. Danforth Chapel
<http://architecture.about.com>



Image 13 St Joseph's roof (ACT Heritage 2016)



Image 14 Lloyd Wright's Unitarian Meeting House, Madison
<http://www.mcnees.org>



Image 15 Roofline at St Joseph's (ACT Heritage 2016)



Image 16 Lloyd Wright's Beth Shalom Synagogue
<http://www.bc.edu>



Image 17 Tower at St Joseph's (ACT Heritage 2016)

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