

NON-STATUTORY BACKGROUND INFORMATION For UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA, STUDENT RESIDENCE GROUP 2

As of 14 July 2008

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PLACE

- University of Canberra Student Residence Group 2, Block 1, Section 3, Suburb of Bruce, ACT.

Within this block, the area under provisional registration includes a 6m curtilledge to the west and south of the Residence Group 2 block building, extending along the southern border to within 6m of the buildings of the Residence Group 1 block and incorporating the parklands between Residence blocks 1 and 2. The northern boundary of the registered area is marked by the southern edge of the footpath extending through to the main campus.

HISTORY OF THE PLACE

The University of Canberra Student Residence Group 2 was designed by John Andrews International in 1973-74, for the Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ), construction being completed in 1975.¹ The CCAЕ became the University of Canberra in 1990.

Colleges of Advanced Education were a new type of tertiary level education that emerged in Australia in the 1960s to provide vocational training and be equivalent to universities in stature although different in kind. By 1970 the Canberra College of Advanced Education was established with Dr Sam Richardson as the first Principal and a site in the Belconnen suburb of Bruce, dedicated on 28 October 1968 by the Prime Minister John Gorton. The development of the CCAЕ also coincided with the introduction of free tertiary education by the Federal Labor Government under Prime Minister Gough Whitlam 1972-1975 that also provided extensive funds for the initiative.

Hassell, McConnell and Partners were engaged as architect planners by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) with Professor Gordon Stephenson of the University of Western Australia as master-planning adviser to the College. Two orthogonal axes were used to configure the site with the academic buildings laid out along a north-south ridgeline and sporting and student residences along an east-west axis. The sparsely vegetated campus underwent major tree planting with native species including College Park to the north of the student residences.

In normal university residences, student rooms were entered off long internal corridors with a refectory and a large catering kitchen for communal use. Council decided that it would experiment with a type of student residence of which there was little experience in Australia. Called *studentenheim*, students would cook and otherwise provide for themselves without the supervision of wardens, tutors or College management. Resident committees would liaise with College administration in terms of cleaning and maintenance of facilities. The design of the Group 2 residence provided this alternative. Modules were created comprising six study bedrooms with a separate sitting room, kitchen area and shared toilet facilities. Over the years students have given this group the affectionate 'nick-names' the "Eggcrates", "New Ressies" or "Ressie 2".

The builder was Leighton Pty Ltd, and its role was more extensive than in a traditional building project. The approach used to facilitate the building was similar to a "Design and Construct" procurement system where the architect was employed by the builder to produce the design and documentation only, without a contract administration role being provided by the architect. The structural and civil engineering firm for the project was Gordon and Northrop Pty Ltd.

The university students value the residence as a pleasant place to live and study. The success and popularity of *studentenheim* was such that the ANU built 'Toad Hall' on principles developed by the CCAE, also with Andrews as architect.

The strong and forthright architecture of the University of Canberra Student Residence Group 2 and its innovative planning make it arguably the most architecturally important student residential college in Canberra and otherwise one of Canberra's more important buildings of its time.

John Hamilton Andrews AO LFRAIA (1933-)

Professor John Andrews returned to Australia in 1969 after studying at Harvard University and carrying on his own practice in Toronto, Canada from 1961-69, and teaching at the University of Toronto. He designed notable buildings in Canada and USA including Scarborough College, Toronto; Harvard Graduate School of Design, Boston; the Miami Passenger Terminal, and the Intelsat Headquarters Building in Washington, DC.⁹

The Cameron Offices, Belconnen, 1976, is Andrew's major work in Canberra and Australia. The Callam Office, Woden, 1981, (former Woden Technical and Further Education College) and student residential housing at Toad Hall ANU, 1977, are his other major buildings in Canberra.¹⁰

Toad Hall is a face brick building that has an interlocking plan of bedroom clusters around a common room with internal circulation vertically via stairs and horizontally via the stair landings through common rooms. There are shared facilities and no refectory.

In Australia his notable buildings are The American Express Tower, (formerly King George Tower), Sydney (1976), (1981) Darling Harbour Convention Centre, Sydney, (1990), and various other convention centres, university buildings and residential works.

Among his many international awards are the Centennial Medal and the Massey Medal for Architecture in Canada, 1967; the Arnold Brunner memorial Award in Architecture from the American Academy and the Institute of Arts and Letters, 1971; and the American Institute of Architects Honor Award, 1973. He was made a member of the Order of Australia in 1981; received the Advance Australia Award in 1982; won the Sulman Medal in 1983 and was awarded a Centenary Medal in 2001.¹¹

John Andrews was a committee member for the judging of the Parliament House of Australia and was awarded the RAIA Gold Medal in 1980. Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor states, "His presence in this country has provided a stimulating influence for Australian architecture".¹²

John Andrews wrote of the residential complex that: "As a social environment the CCAE is very successful. In this respect it is by far the best of the four residences I have designed". He has recently reconfirmed this belief.¹³

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE

The University of Canberra Student Residence Group 2 is an example of the combination of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, and plain, smooth wall surface; and the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style (1960-) with its strong shapes boldly composed, expressed reinforced-concrete, large areas of blank wall and off-form concrete.¹⁴

The University of Canberra is located in a park like setting in the suburb of Bruce, surrounded by major roads with Belconnen Town Centre, John Knight Park and Lake Ginninderra to the west and suburban housing to the south and east. The University was originally built as the Canberra College of Advanced Education and the original master plan for the campus placed the main academic buildings along a concourse at the centre of the site on a north-south ridge line with the main entry to the south, off College Street.

A secondary east-west axis was developed for associated non-academic activities, with the sports centre to the east and the student residences to the west. The residences are about 450m to the west of the central concourse in a residential precinct, separate from the main campus buildings, adjacent to Aikman Drive and with car access from College Street. Residence Group 2 is west of the original Residence Group 1 (Block A-H residences) and within easy walking distance of the Belconnen Town Centre. Built on a north facing hillside, Student Residence Group 2 overlooks the College Park with its plantation of Eucalyptus and Casuarinas and is framed by well-established native woodland.

The Student Residence Group 2 is more formally referred to as Blocks I-N, while the students refer to them as the "Eggcrates", "New Ressies" or "Ressies 2". The mixed sex residential complex consists of 156 student study/bedrooms arranged in 27, "units" of six.

The building is organised on a 3.05m (10' x 10') planning grid, in six tiers of five levels which cascade on a sloping site, each tier being separated, but functionally connected by access street/stairways. The innovative planning orientates the blocks to the northeast while the stairs step down in a more northerly direction requiring a slight off-set at each level that forms an external alcove at the unit entries. This solution very successfully resolves the visual dilemma of standing at the top of the flight and looking down an extensive stair. Combined with the landings and entry porches, the effect is reminiscent of a southern European hill town. Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor states, "The scale and distribution of the units creates a level of intimacy more closely resembling that provided in general residential developments".⁸

The interlocking composition of the residential units, staggered in plan allows four of the six study/bedrooms to receive good winter mid-morning sun and all to have views across a predominantly natural landscape. Each unit is rectangular in form and is entered off the external communal street/stairway at the southwest corner from a front entry porch. The porch is given emphasis by a blade column placed within the stair treads that support the unit over and partially divides the stair to form a more intimate route. The porch is separated from the stair by a concrete balustrade wall that has a splayed top.

There is approximately a two-metre change in floor level between each unit as they step down the site, a climb of 13 rises to the street/stairway, while there is a small step down in floor level across the whole residence from the east to the west. The level change across the site required a reduction in units to the two western most tiers.

The glazing to the entry door and sidelight is timber framed and full height which opens into the lounge area. The study/bedrooms are arranged in groups of six with common lounge, dining, cooking and ablution facilities. The rectangular shaped lounge room is on two levels and is planned in a north/south direction. It is predominantly enclosed and surrounded by rooms with the study/bedroom in an inverted "L" form around the lounge. The communal kitchen is to the east and one of the study/bedrooms is to the west. The upper lounge area is approached up four steps next to the kitchen. This area leads to the second study/bedroom that has a north corner window, and to two of the northeast study/bedrooms. A short passage to the east leads to the remaining two study/bedrooms. Each of these northeast rooms has

full width glazing. The separate wet areas open off the passage. At the end of the passage is the secondary entry that opens onto a small porch off another main external street/stairway.

The communal laundries are located one level below the top southwest level of the residences and are approached just behind the entry porches to this level's units. These are set below ground and are naturally lit from above by sloping glazed roofs that extend along the southwest façade.

Most internal walls are masonry with the end wall to the wet areas painted externally. All external surfaces are off-form concrete except for the painted masonry walls to the rear entries and the bull-nosed corrugated roof. Smooth in situ off form concrete and the original roofing material, corrugated fibre cement sheet and barges, gave a uniform one material effect to the construction and visual character of the building.

Condition

The building is in remarkably good condition externally and mature trees around the site add to the aesthetic quality of the group. The original concrete construction joints appear not to have been well formed and have obvious patching, most likely done at the time of construction. The original Janitor's Flat was the accommodation for the "Ressies Councillor", located in the top southeast unit. This unit has been clad in painted fibre sheet. In the original plan it was a self-contained two bedroom unit with an office and waiting room, planned within the same external form as the student units. The grey coloured fibre cement sheet roofing has been replaced with painted corrugated metal, however, it is an olive green colour and not a light grey to match the colour of the original fibre cement.

Design Comments

Other architectural elements of the Late Twentieth-Century International style (1960-) displayed by the building that relate to the external forms are:

- Corbusian window motif;
- contrasting non-rectangular shape (the bull-nosed roof), and
- contrasting texture (corrugated roofing).¹⁶

The additional significant design features are; the corner windows, the street/stairways, cantilevering structure and stepped planning.

While there are many student residence buildings on the university campuses in Canberra, arguably only three are of great architectural significance. The University of Canberra Student Residence Group 2 can be contrasted with Burgmann College by Dirk Bolt & Associates, 1971, and Toad Hall by John Andrews International, 1977, both at the Australian National University and both examples of the Late Twentieth-Century International style. The face brick of Toad Hall has an irregular interlocking plan of bedroom clusters around common rooms with internal stairs and circulation, while Burgmann College is more traditional with its rooms organised off corridors in two multi levelled wings with a well designed refectory.

The residences can be compared with other off-form in situ concrete buildings in Canberra, many of which are of international and national significance. The nearby Cameron Offices, 1977, by John Andrews International, and the Belconnen Public Library, 1982, by Robin Gibson, both in Belconnen; the High Court of Australia, 1980, and the National Gallery of Australia, 1982, both by Edwards Madigan Torzillo Briggs International. All of these buildings express strong, robust, sculptural, forthright architecture.¹⁷

References

- 1 ACTPLA Building File, 'Residence Group 2 for The Canberra College of Advanced Education'; John Andrews International Architects and conversation with John Andrews; RAIA 1982 *Canberra: An Architectural Guide To Australia's Capital*.
- 2 RAIA op cit.
- 3 Taylor, Jennifer 1990 *Australian Architecture since 1960*, RAIA.
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Ibid.

- 6 Ibid.
- 7 ACTPLA op cit.,
- 8 Andrews, John, and Jennifer Taylor 1982 *Architecture: a performing art*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.
- 9 Taylor, op cit.
- 10 RSTCA
- 11 Reid, Paul 2002 *Canberra following Griffin: A Design History of Australia's National Capital* National Archives of Australia, and Australian Honours web site.
- 12 Taylor, op cit.
- 13 Andrews & Taylor, op cit., and Conversation with John Andrews.
- 14 Apperly, Richard, Robert Irving and Peter Reynolds 1989 *Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus and Robertson.
- 15 ACTPLA op cit (Survey Drawing by Sowden, Wells & Assoc. Pty Ltd) & RSTCA
- 16 Apperly et al, op cit
- 17 RSTCA.

Other Information Sources

Architecture in Australia, August 1970.

RAIA ACT Chapter RSTCA Citation on University of Canberra Student Residences Group 2