



ACT Heritage Council

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION
BELCONNEN LIBRARY AND PEDESTRIAN PLAZA
(BLOCKS 11, 12, 22, AND 38 SECTION 54, BELCONNEN)**

At its meeting of 13 February 2024 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Belconnen Library was eligible for provisional registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Belconnen Library against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.



Figure 1 Belconnen Library from Chandler Street – view from Northeast corner (ACT Heritage, 2020)

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HISTORY

The Belconnen Library was designed in 1979 by prominent Australian architect Robin Gibson for the NCDC as a prominent feature of their plan for the Belconnen Town Centre. While the larger plans for the group centre were not fully realised, the library was built along with the adjacent plaza, also designed by Gibson, and has remained relatively unchanged while the surrounding area has undergone significant changes.

Table 1 Timeline for the planning and construction of the Belconnen Library

15 November 1978	Draft policy plan for S54 including the site boundary and development plans for the library
29 November 1978	Brief issued to Robin Gibson and Partners
13 December 1978	Draft policy plan and draft development plan now includes the plaza
17 January 1979	Brief for the plaza issued to Robin Gibson and Partners
27 June 1979	Plaza and Library projects amalgamated with an upper cost limit of \$1,552,000
26 March 1979	Preliminary sketch plans for the Library approved
27 March 1979	Preliminary sketch plans for the Plaza approved
18 May 1979	Final sketch plans for the Plaza approved
22 May 1979	Final sketch plans for the Library approved
November 1979	The final plans included amendments required by the client (i.e. CPLS) including sliding airlock doors

The design of the Library

In a 24 June 1977 Minute Paper from Paul Reid to Tony Powell an architectural competition is suggested as the Library was considered fairly simple and small enough in scope to attract any architect and it was noted that, "...the site is an important one in the Belconnen Town Centre and the building plays a significant role in the community affairs."

The design selection exercise was narrowed down to six architectural firms to submit for the library project:

1. Cheeseman, Doley, Neighbour and Raffan
2. Eggleston MacDonald
3. Collard, Clarke and Jackson
4. Robin Gibson
5. Robert Dickson and Associates Pty Ltd
6. Neil Renfree in association with Holford and Partners

However, as there were delays and the site was not yet fixed, it was decided in January 1978 that rather than a competition the Architectural Division within the Commission would simply select a preferred architect from the list, in this case it was decided to go with Robin Gibson who was sent a proposal on 29 November 1978.

The Belconnen Town Centre Library Urban Design Guidelines included in NCDC file #78/1721 specified, among others, the following important conditions:

- The library may fully cover the site, but the below colonnades must abut the boundaries
- 3m covered walkways on the north and east sides must be available as part of the plaza and may be cantilevered, although "...treating the walkway as a colonnade...is strongly preferred."
- The form of the building should reinforce that of the Cameron Offices; i.e. simple and geometric with a horizontal aspect, while also respecting the visual linkages with the Revival Centre (including the same colour and tone). The materials could match the brick of the Revival Centre, but a

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- monolithic treatment was preferred.
- Visual linkages from the plaza to the interior of the library should be considered, with clear glass recommended.
- The design should also express the library as a termination point in the pedestrian routes

Following comments from the Canberra Public Library Service (CPLS) the design was changed to keep children's and adult's services on the same floor as well as to address several other issues; the preliminary plan was recommended to be accepted in March 1979 following a meeting of the CPLS committee. This was mostly a case of how well all the internal features and activity areas worked together and were inter-related. It was also during this meeting that it was noted that the revolving doors would be replaced and the location of the entrance was questioned, particularly if it could be moved to the west closer to the mall if things didn't work out as expected – the answer was that weather and pedestrian modelling suggested that the east entrance was still best and that it served the Chandler Street parking and CCAE students. There were also concerns over the double height entry and the service desk there, particularly lighting and also the suitability of the building to be extended in the future. The architect resolved these issues with some minor modifications, which were easily accommodated by the relatively open floorplan of the building; a feature that has served it well over time as library services have changed with new technologies and changing layouts varying drastically yet have been relatively easy to accommodate.

Built on the site of the former Emu Bank homestead, the Belconnen Library was located north of the then recently completed Cameron Office and near the Belconnen Bus Interchange. The Library was opened by Sir Zelman Cowan, Governor-General of Australia, in September 1981.¹

The Library features a small collection of art, both permanent and on temporary display. The foyer has a display area for temporary displays but is mostly used for showcasing books.

The National Capital Development Commission supported the ACT Crafts Council in their application for an Australian Bicentenary Authority grant to commission a mural for the Belconnen Library. In early 1988, a ceramic tile mural, *Horizon* (or *Horizon 1*, although noted by *The Canberra Times* as being called *My Country* when it was unveiled), by Sally Cleary was installed on the bulkhead above the loans desk and unveiled on Friday 29 January 1988 by Mr John Langmore, Member for Fraser². However, the mural appears to have been built over at an unknown date and the status of the mural is currently unknown.



Figure 2 *Horizon* by Sally Cleary (<https://www.sallycleary.com/Architectural-Ceramics-1988-2000>)

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In 2001, a set of five panels of screen printed ceramic tiles showing everyday life of Canberrans was created by Wellspring Environment Arts & Design. The five panels were located in each of the five main valleys of Canberra, with one of the panels installed on the curved outer wall of the Library.

The community room has hosted regular community groups, such as mothers groups or gaming groups and has seen several other uses such as storage as demand required. Other changes include the rear door for the elevator being decommissioned (still in-situ). The report from the architect³ states that the purpose of the building is to serve as a cultural information and community centre...by providing appropriate facilities that the library will encourage all groups of the community to utilise them and create further awareness of activities within the community” and that in “...answering of these functional needs of the library’s activities together with those of the community is inherent in the development of the architecture for the Belconnen Town Centre Library.”



Figure 3 Scale model of the Belconnen Town Library on display at the Belconnen Mall (ACT Heritage Library ref#002668 and #002669)

It is also worth noting that that the Library was designed in consultation with representative groups⁴ and the scale model of the building was on display in the mall as part of the public consultation (Figure 3).

The Library was awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion in 1982, which is the highest award presented by the Chapter for architectural excellence to the best recent building. In 1982, the jury for the RAIA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion stated: “It is a very human building; a building for people. It has a scale and personality that is totally in key with the needs of a community facility; it has succeeded in providing a setting where young and old can feel comfortable and a sense that the building is part of their community. Whilst the building is restrained in its expression of form and space it is exquisite in its detailing and use of materials. The concrete work is very refined and the use of glass is masterful.”⁵ With the judging panel continuing to say that it “...had a sense of comfort and composure and did not try to over-compensate for its modest proportions and difficult location.” At that time, it was thought that the problem of the incomplete Belconnen Town Centre Master Plan would be addressed in the future by new buildings and landscaping filling out the area over time. The judges commented several times about how the building addressed community needs and how well all the respective pieces of the design were laid out and worked together.⁶ The Library also received the Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter 25 Year Award for Enduring Architecture in 2010.

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Comparisons with other Canberra libraries

In March 1974, the first Library of the Belconnen district was opened in the Canberra College of Advanced Education (now Canberra University) followed by the Kippax ‘temporary’ Public Library in transportable buildings in October 1978.⁷

The National Library of Australia’s (NLA) 1979 annual report noted that, “The function of the Canberra Public Library Service (CPLS) is to provide a public lending library service for Canberra through a central library and suburban branches. A new branch library, with a capacity for 15,000 volumes, was opened at Kippax in July to serve the residents of north-west Belconnen. It is housed in a portable building which will eventually be replaced by a permanent building on an adjoining site. Planning began during the year for the Belconnen Town Centre Library... It is expected that the library will be completed in 1981 to serve a population of 62,000.”⁸. However, by 1981 the CPLS had been separated out from the national institution to become its own local library system.

During 1979 an inter-departmental committee was formed to discuss the future of the CPLS as the NLA saw it as an anachronistic service against its national-level charter. The committee, “...recommended that the CPLS be transferred to the Department of the Capital Territory, that the CPLS Advisory Committee become a committee advising the Minister for the Capital Territory, and that the transfer of functions take place on 1 July 1981.”⁹ On 1 July the CPLS officially split from the NLA and came under the control of the Department of the Capital – Legislation and Policy Co-ordination Division; however, it was essentially independent under the control of the Canberra Public Librarian with guidance from the CPLS Committee and had access to the Minister via the Secretary of the Department of the Capital Territory¹⁰. Since then the name has changed to reflect changing functions within the service; first to the ACT Library and Information Service in 2000, and then to its current name, Libraries ACT, in 2011¹¹.

As of 2021 there are nine branches of Libraries ACT: Dickson (opened in 1969), Woden (1977), Belconnen (1981), Erindale (1983), Tuggeranong (1990), Kippax (2005), Civic (2006 – although it had existed in several locations in the City starting in the North Building in 1961), Kingston (2009) and Gungahlin (2011). Today’s extant libraries do not reflect the full history of libraries in the ACT, which date back to St John’s Schoolhouse in 1855 and the first public library, based on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, starting in 1927.¹²

The most directly comparable place to the Belconnen Library is the Woden Library as it is from the same period in the ACT’s development and also a contemporary modernist design. To a lesser extent the Dickson Library is also comparable, as it was the first of the ACT’s modern libraries but, unlike both the Belconnen and Woden libraries, it was not an extension into a new town centre as part of the Y-Plan. Some comparison can also be made to the NLA as the original parent institution for the mid-century Canberra libraries, however the purpose and scale of the service provided differ and this is the same reasons that the NLA divested itself of the CPLS. While the Belconnen Library was counted among the ACT’s best performing libraries¹³, considering its catchment, it should be performing at a much higher level similar to Dickson and Woden, but it seems to be hampered by its location and poor connections with other services and facilities¹⁴.

Since it opened in 1981, major technological changes have impacted the way that the library building is used.

“The content of the ACT library collection has changed over time, as new forms of material have become available for borrowing. Fiction books were added to the collection in 1948, and paperbacks included in 1974. In 1975 music listening facilities were introduced (people could listen to records in the library but not take them home), and printed music was loaned from 1977. The library offered spoken word cassettes during the 1980s, initially as a service for people with vision impairment. CDs and DVDs were then included in the collection, and in 2006 eBook and eAudiobook services were introduced.” (Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services 2018:8)

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The introduction of computer cataloguing and self-checkout systems was one technological change that impacted that changed the use of the building compared to the original design intent. When the Belconnen Library opened in 1981 the catalogue system was computerised, but still required manual input from the librarian, necessitating a large central loans desk; however, much of the process is now automated using Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology and more advanced computerised cataloguing and management. Internet access has also had a major impact on library services. It has reduced the need for librarians to be on hand for enquiries and has even replaced some services but has also changed the way the library is used as space and infrastructure was required to provide access to the public, and then the space required was reduced with the proliferation of smart devices. The library service has always been able to adapt to changes in the way libraries are used and what the community want from their local library,¹⁵ including the adaptation of buildings such as the Belconnen Library.

The Plaza

The purpose of the Plaza was to create a place that helped people enjoy the area in line with the purpose of the surrounding buildings while reinforcing the NCDC's plans for pedestrian movement in and through the space. So to design the Plaza, Gibson had to take into account the existing Revival Centre, the Library (which he was also designing) and a proposed future commercial development (which ended up being a seniors centre). Of import to the design is that the existing carpark to the west was considered adequate and so only pedestrian access – coming from the carpark, the residential area along Chandler Street, the bus terminal and the Cameron Offices – was to be accounted for. A large elm tree was to be retained and walkways were to have maximum covered areas. Gibson also added a small amphitheatre protected from north-west winds for small performances. Gibson used a system of stair, walkways and ramps to guide articulation in and through the plaza, carefully aligned to avoid areas of congregation that could be adversely affected by noise of passers-by. It was recognised that a wind tunnel effect could occur and strategies, such as lowering the Plaza and dense planting immediately north of the library, were developed to minimise this impact. It was also noted that all levels of the plaza were below the library, allowing for adequate drainage, even in extreme weather events. The landscape architect for the Plaza was Barbara van den Broek.¹⁶

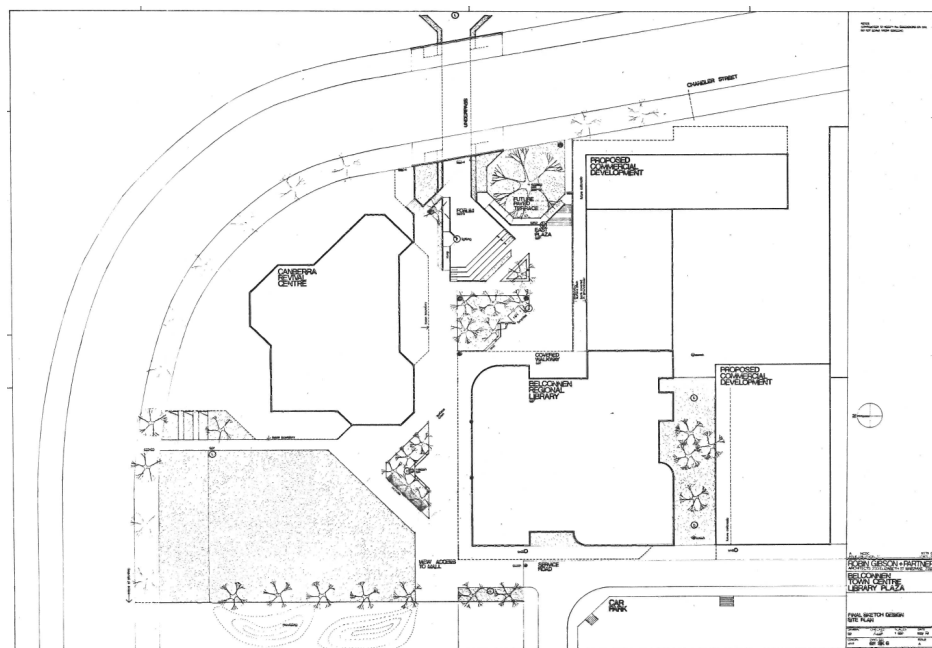


Figure 4 Plaza design from Robin Gibson & Partners Architects (1979) Belconnen Town Centre Plaza Report. Report commissioned for the NCDC, Canberra.

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Figure 5 Concept illustration from Robin Gibson & Partners Architects (1979) Belconnen Town Centre Plaza Report. Report commissioned for the NCDC, Canberra.



Figure 6 Concept illustration from Robin Gibson & Partners Architects (1979) Belconnen Town Centre Plaza Report. Report commissioned for the NCDC, Canberra.

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Planning of the Belconnen Town Centre

The Belconnen library was intended as an integral part of the Belconnen Town Centre with the NCDC planners expending a great deal of time and effort balancing the needs of the community with that of the Canberra Public Library Service, the Belconnen Mall, the Revival Centre, the Bus Interchange, the Cameron Offices and the surrounding business, educational and residential areas via the pedestrian network and linked plaza. However, this did not develop as intended, with the mall building further away and various other anchor locations moving away, leading to weak connections and poor pedestrian access to the area and the underperforming of the library.

“...[the] NCDC [National Capital Development Commission] conceived [Belconnen] as more than a place for regional shopping with sites for service trades and major government offices. It wanted to create "a place for living, for leisure and for people" with 24-hour activity and the NCDC literature had a rare sparkle as it alluded to a water's edge entertainment sector where markets, taverns, cinemas, boat hires, ice-skating and the like would contribute to "a bright and lively atmosphere." To achieve this vitality the NCDC proposed, in another departure from Woden, to blend shopping, commercial and community facilities - such as a mix of cafe, savings bank and boutique with library, child care and post office and bring more than 10,000 permanent residents into the heart of the town...”¹⁷

Sparke 1987:181

The NCDC published *The Future Canberra* in 1965, outlining its plan to expand the city to accommodate 250,000 people by 1980; expanding into the Districts of Belconnen and Woden with future possible expansions into Weston Creek, Tuggeranong, Jerrabomberra Majura and Gungahlin – each capable of housing 50,000 to 100,000 people. The Districts were meant to be relatively self-contained while supporting the central City area and functions. These Districts would then be divided into neighbourhoods (or suburbs, although technically referred to as “Divisions”) of about 4,000 centred around a small shop and school. There would also be larger centres based on the catchment of three or four neighbourhoods around a larger shopping centre and high school¹⁸. After the plan was published the NCDC made quick ground in establishing Woden and Belconnen, but before they were complete, the plan was reassessed in *Tomorrow's Canberra* in 1970.

The NCDC's Y-plan spread Canberra's development into a series of decentralised towns with populations between 100,000 to 200,000 with Civic remaining as the dominant centre. After planning for Woden, Belconnen was the next town centre to be developed with a planned population of 120,000 people; however lower growth than expected occurred and a review of the Belconnen plan in 1982 projected a population of only 87,200, along with private development occurring differently to what had been planned, lead to a major redesign in 1986¹⁹.

In 1970, a pattern of dispersed employment areas, particularly in the new districts of Woden and Belconnen, was developing through the NCDC's planning and allocation of land and building program²⁰. “The town centre will be the most important centre in each town. It will serve as a neighbourhood centre for the adjoining higher density housing, a group centre for the adjoining neighbourhoods, and a comparison shopping, social, recreation, and cultural centre for the whole town. It will also be an important employment area as it will contain a large complex of government offices.”²¹ It was also noted that they will be pedestrian focused and slow to develop and, as such, can change character over time, so it was considered important for the NCDC to control building form and location.

The Belconnen Town Centre core area was intended to be a closely integrated conglomeration of commercial residential and cultural facilities. “In keeping with the general concept on which the planning of Canberra's town centre is based, there will be a variety of inter-related activities in the core area of Belconnen Town Centre, such as the retail mall, the bus interchange, government and private offices, a

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library and health centre”²² was the promise of the day; however this is not how it developed.



Figure 7 The NCDP's Y-Plan from *Tomorrow's Canberra* (p.226)

The greatest impact to the plan was by the mall being built on the other side of Benjamin Way, splitting off one of the biggest drawcards and cohesive agents. After this, there seemed to be a period of planning catch-up wherein the NCDP tried its best to make do with the situation presented to them, while also trying to appease all the other interested parties who had developed their own plans based on the previously announced plans that never eventuated. Of interest is that Benjamin Way was meant to be on the periphery of the core area, so it was not planned to be crossed often by pedestrians and also explains the pedestrian plaza and walking routes that existed around the Library site that no longer (or rather, never) function[ed] the way they were intended²³; but the way the area has developed now has Benjamin Way as the main street²⁴.

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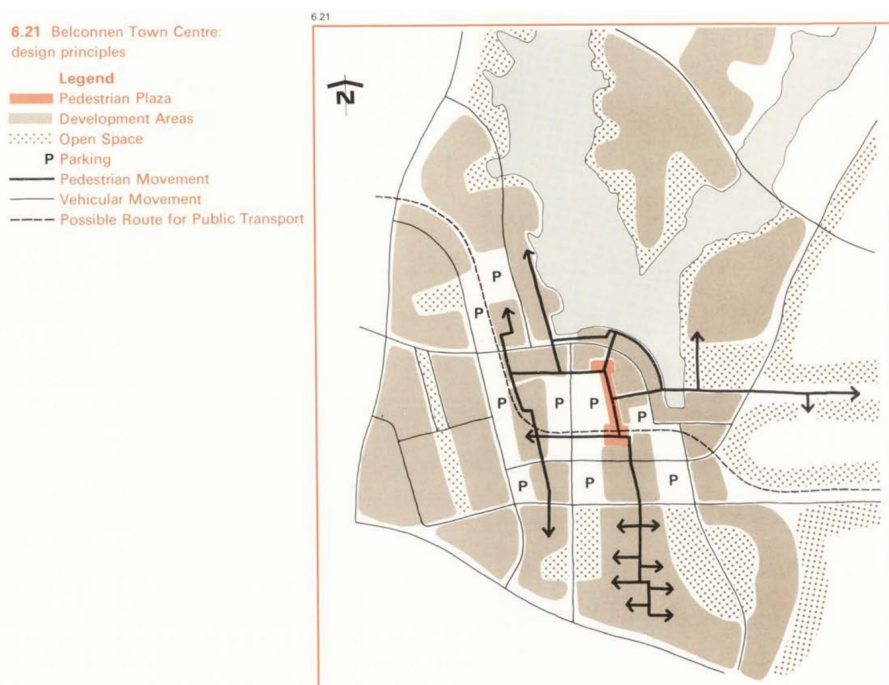


Figure 8 Belconnen Town Centre design principles from the NCDC's *Tomorrow's Canberra* p.102

The Library and the Plan for Belconnen

The Cameron Offices were the first major buildings to be constructed in Belconnen. They formed an integral part of the original town plan in which the aim was to provide a relatively compact pedestrian-oriented town centre on a north south axis following the slope of the land, from housing to the south through the Cameron Offices area, transport interchange and shopping centre on the manmade Lake Ginninderra, which was to have a mix of cultural buildings and housing along its shore.²⁵

As a part of this plan the Belconnen Library would have been located at the centre of a pedestrian-centric town, connected to the mall and other services by close proximity and even overhead walkways. The proposed connections and massing of built features can be seen in Figure 21 and was a key aspect of the architect's planning of the library and associated plaza which was supposed to be surrounded by commercial developments as the architect noted in their report to the NCDC "The relationship of the planned pedestrian walkway, the position of the Revival Centre and the two-storied portion of the library housing the Community area affords the opportunity of creating a pivotal point to the Plaza design. This concept is reinforced with the positioning of the curved wall to the Library and the placement of the circular column on the extreme corner of the site. The increased height of this two-storied area and the opening of the wall into a balcony for the Community area emphasises the spatial effect at this junction. This pivotal point generating from the column will mark the change of direction of the pedestrian walkways and establish the entry link between the Plaza spaces. The increased height of the two-storied area is located so as to form a link between the commercial development zone and the Revival Centre. Similarly, the increased height of the wall to the clearstorey[sic] areas will create a visual bulk to the building from the urban design viewpoint when viewed from the distance."²⁶

The proposed Belconnen Mall was a pivotal part of the NCDC's planning for the area, serving as an anchor site to attract and concentrate people in the area. The Mall was being developed by the Canberra Commercial Development Authority (CCDA), which was set up under the *Canberra Commercial Development Authority Ordinance 1974* specifically to build and run the Mall, including related community facilities, as a commercial entity with profits being returned to the government for the benefit of the community. The CCDA did not always see eye-to-eye with the NCDC who had envisioned a large shopping

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centre located on section 54 in close proximity to other planned services, such as the library, and connected to their other major projects, such as the Cameron Offices. The CCDA, on the other hand envisioned a centre twice as large that would not fit in section 54 along with all the required parking and the rest of the NDC's planned core area facilities. The CCDA pushed to have their shopping centre to the west of Benjamin Way with a larger footprint, while the NDC tried to keep them in section 54 and a much smaller building. Eventually the CCDA convinced the NDC that a multi-stage approach, starting in their preferred location on the west of Benjamin Way and eventually building over it, was the way to go. None of the parties must have been very serious about this plan because it appears to have been abandoned by 1978.

In a file note from Mr John Paynter 14 August 1974 he notes, "...I believe the Commission should take the view that a major library facility is a fundamental element of community infrastructure and a basic requirement of any town centre serving a population in the order of 100,000 plus." The F.A.C.A. also commented that a library would be important as a community facility, "...would generate pedestrian movement throughout the day..."

At several points in the NDC file #78/1721 it is noted that the library site was considered a major location in the Town Centre planning and that it was undesirable to leave it vacant between the mall opening up in 1977 to when the library was intended to open in 1980-81, but it was still important enough to reserve the site. Other parts of Section 54 were considered, such as the corner of Chandler St and Benjamin Way (the current entrance of Margaret Timpson Park) – this was agreed on in principle in a planning committee meeting in March 1978 and the library committee also agreed. A minute paper from H. L. Westerman on 4 April 1978 noted a discussion with the Minister that all were happy for this to proceed, but that he anticipated objections from Mr Pead as Chairman of the CCDA as this would result in a smaller footprint for the proposed stage II of the mall that was planned to share Section 54. After more discussions in May 1978, it was noted that the CCDA were not opposed to the Library site, but still had reservations about the amount of space they would require (they suggested 20,000m² while the NDC was thinking closer to 10,000m²) and there was talk within the NDC of nudging the library to an alternate site to avoid souring relations with the CCDA. By September 1978, there were new NDC policies for the Belconnen Core Area that wanted three stories along Benjamin Way and presented other benefits for the library to relocate closer to the Bus Interchange (e.g. a proposed diagonal pedestrian link, the release of adjacent sites for commercial development, new parking and service access, possible basement parking at the new site and allowing a single storey building) as shown in Figure 23. On 25 October 1978, Martin Jones wrote a minute paper to Hans Westerman (cc Jacques Robertson) noting the preliminary results of the library survey of users that led to a preference for a site that was adjacent to Benjamin Way was preferable as the majority of users were linked in some way to the town centre/mall.

By 1986 the town plan had changed in response to circumstances²⁷. The core of the town centre had become more spread out as the mall moved to the western side of Benjamin way, rather than taking up most of Section 54 and abutting the Library. Concerns about the change were raised in an 25 June 1979 letter from Rev. R. J. Kirkwood from the Canberra Revival Centre to Minister for the Capital Territory R. J. Ellicot objecting to the changes in planning for the Belconnen Town Centre as totally changing the focus of the core area away from Section 54 as previously planned, noting that the library would not create a lively pedestrian plaza or be conducive to commercial activity in the area (which they had built into their church based on the previous NDC advice). Following this was a series of internal memos and notes defending the NDC's position and espousing the design benefits of the Library. This was reaffirmed in the Department's letter they drafted as a response from the Minister to the Reverend suggesting that the changes will not fundamentally change the prospects of the area, the flow through traffic and the activity of the plaza.

This resulted in poor pedestrian linkages and parking for the Library and the disjointed layout of the different functions around the core meant that it was less likely for people to utilise secondary destinations and, "in the case of the libraries it appears that Belconnen has a lower level of utilisation than the Woden facility. This is because it is removed from the mall and people are more inclined to make a separate trip from their home for this purpose"²⁸ a situation that still affects the full utilisation of the Library as noted in

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the 2018 Standing Committee inquiry into ACT Libraries²⁹. This is illustrated shortly after the library was opened during a 2CA radio talkback segment on 25 September 1981 in which a caller noted her trouble in locating the entrance to the library as it pointed away from the path from the mall and confusion amongst people she asked where it was³⁰.

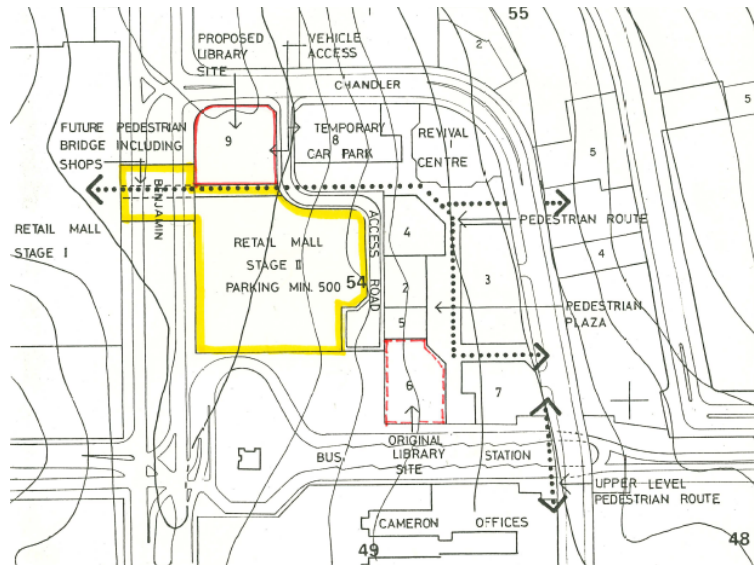


Figure 9 the 18 April 1978 suggested new site for the library, including the original planned location of the mall and the pedestrian routes throughout.

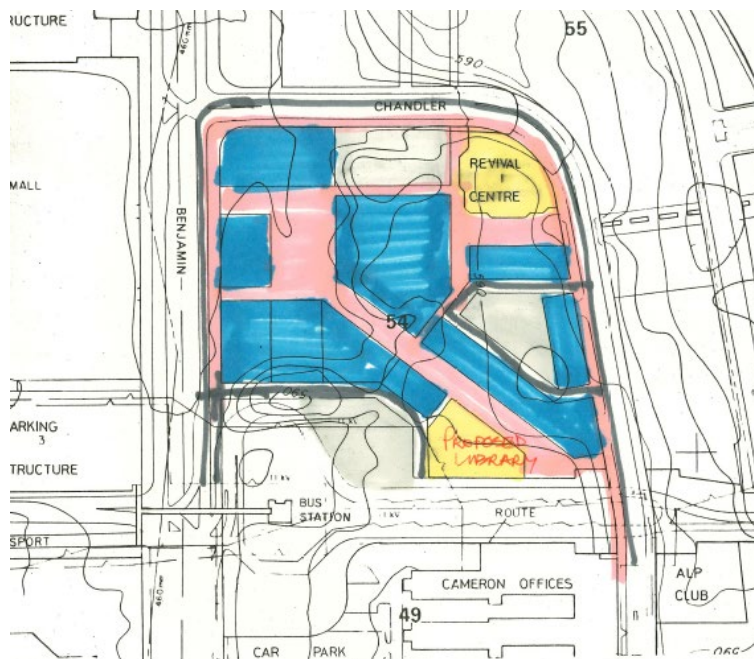


Figure 10 In a meeting with the CPLS on 25 September 1978 the plan had changed again with a much improved pedestrian layout with better access to the bus station and the Cameron Offices while being located along the route to the mall.

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Figure 11 Robin Findlay Gibson AO LFRAIA ARIBA (1930-2014)

Robin Gibson³¹

Robert Findlay ('Robin') Gibson was born in Brisbane in 1930, and attended the Yeronga State School and Brisbane State High School.³² He studied Architecture at the University of Queensland, and graduated with a Diploma of Architecture in 1954 (at that time, the diploma was the professional qualification). During his part-time years in university, he worked in a number of architectural offices in Brisbane and, in particular, gained much knowledge from the progressive firm Hayes and Scott. After graduating, Gibson moved to London and worked with the practices of James Cubitt, Sir Hugh Casson and his partner Neville Conder.³³ When Gibson was in London, he travelled across Europe and became interested in modern architecture. On his return to Brisbane in 1957, Gibson established his own practice. Most of his major projects are in Queensland, with the exception of the Belconnen Library.³⁴

An early adherence to a limited palette of materials in shop fitouts is what supposedly led to the practice being referred to as "Glass, Brass, Blackbean and Arse"³⁵, which in an International Union of Architects article was explained by the colloquialism of "arse" referring to "balls" (i.e. courage). However, Jones' suggestion is that it is not really the allusion to being courageous, but rather Gibson's reputation for arrogance, such as with the high level of finish he required on sites and his practice of making the builder tear something down early in a project for not being good enough, regardless of the level of finish, in order to assert dominance and uphold exacting standards expected of the rest of the build. While the nickname was used in a side note in an article about the Belconnen Library, it really only applies to his earlier work on commercial fitouts as the material palette moved on to concrete, steel and glass with the larger designs. It is unknown if the last part of the nickname remained appropriate.

Robin Gibson and Partners

Robin Gibson and Partners was a Brisbane-based architectural practice, established by Gibson in 1957 with him as the only actual partner until his retirement and the closure of the firm in 2013. The firm started with smaller projects, quickly establishing a reputation for high class modernist commercial designs and store fitouts. Gibson was able to use the commercial contacts he made to expand his client network into larger business and government domains³⁶. Gibson's architecture practice was quite diverse in that it undertook a

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wide range of work including single residential, small retail, industrial and major commercial and civic projects.

In April 1973, Gibson won a two-stage design competition for a new Queensland Art Gallery in South Brisbane. Later, Gibson's commission expanded to the design of the whole of the current Queensland Cultural Centre at South Bank, that also included the Queensland Performing Arts Complex, the Queensland Museum and the State Library of Queensland.³⁷

In the late 1960s, the firm started standardising techniques for a high and consistent standard of designs that represented the firm, rather than the person who drew them. This was important, because at this stage Gibson was most heavily involved in the design brief and initial design ideas before assigning the completion, under his strict supervision, of the work to his staff. It is worth noting that as business quickly grew in the early 1980s, Gibson's focus was on the Queensland Cultural Centre and the more junior staff had considerable control over other projects at the time, but Gibson still retain full control of the company and had final sign-off of the designs.³⁸

The firm was at its peak in the early 1980s with around 50 staff working on a number of complex projects, mostly in Brisbane, but also putting out entries to prestigious architectural competitions in the ACT for Parliament House and the National Archives building. It was during this time that the firm was commissioned to design the Belconnen Library.³⁹

Gibson has noted that architects' designs are influenced by a matrix of "...economic, technological, cultural and social influences overlaid with the functional needs and occupational requirements, defined by the project brief, collectively arranged into built form, using the imaginative inputs of the architect."⁴⁰ In designing the University of Queensland Central Library, Gibson worked closely with a well-informed client and was able to fit their needs under the umbrella of his design. It was based on simplicity and movement of books and people, something that has clearly flowed into the design of the Belconnen Library where all the essential services were placed on a single floor and different sections separated by space rather than walls. The integrated lighting and services were also established at the UQ library as well as the practice of using grids of standardised fittings and equipment for ease of rearranging the internal spaces for future flexibility of library services.⁴¹ This is backed up in a speech from Gibson⁴² where he noted that his designs are "the result of a continuing design process and not necessarily the result of some artistic whim", particularly noting his analysis of the circulation of books could then be used in later library designs or expansions.

Gibson's designs were mostly based on a grid, but these were often hidden; however, they could also be overt where the underlying functions were related which seems to be the case for the Belconnen Library which was mostly open plan but allowed for easy reorganisation in order to allow for future requirements. "Buildings designed by the firm are widely recognised as prioritizing simple forms, horizontal expression, minimalist detailing, unadorned materials and open, flowing space"⁴³ but going further Llyod also argues that the designs were, "...deliberately regional, addressing light and climate, referencing natural landscape features such as the Brisbane River. Architecture designed by the firm also drew from intangible qualities of place such as the historical and cultural evolution of inner-city Brisbane...", although this is less obvious at Belconnen where an established tree from Emu Bank was retained, but other than respecting the nearby Cameron Offices, as per the design brief, there is not an obvious link to the region. "...Designs that acknowledged these qualities, ensured that their buildings positively contributed to this process of urban development. The use of a minimalist vocabulary evident across these works, which prioritized simplicity of form, structure, materials and detail, it has been argued, also demonstrated a desire to emphasise the functional relationship between built form and people. This included local needs, and lifestyles and the successful creation of functional environments for work, study, commerce and recreation."

Gibson took a holistic approach to urban design and was cognisant of pedestrian movement and created views and vistas connecting natural and built environment. His work has been described as, "Carefully

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choreographed, these connections were and remained for Gibson ‘an essential ingredient’’. “The importance of the human factor, the pedestrian experience, vistas and views, and the city's history are aspects of Gibson's work that have yet to be considered by existing literature. Instead, the predominant focus has been on the formal qualities of the work Gibson produced: the close and studied attention he paid to function and form; the preference for modern, simple-yet-crisp geometries; his fascination with a minimal (and modern) palette of materials (especially concrete); and his debt to international precedent.”⁴⁴

The Belconnen Library is one of a number of libraries Gibson has designed, including the libraries at the Universities of Queensland in 1973 and Griffith University in 1975. The Belconnen Library is Gibson's only commission for the NCDC and was designed during a period in Canberra's history when the NCDC were commissioning buildings with the intent to demonstrate the maturity of the city by intentional focus on an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments. In addition to his well known designs at Griffith University and the Queensland Cultural Centre, Gibson would have been known to the NCDC after he entered an unsuccessful, but well-regarded, entry for the new Australian Parliament House in 1979⁴⁵.

Other notable buildings designed by Gibson include:

- Wheat Silos at Pinkenba, 1969;
- Southern Electricity Authority Control Centre, Belmont, 1977;
- Colonial Mutual Building, Brisbane, 1984;
- Queensland Art Centre, 1985;
- Queensland Museum, 1986; and
- Queensland State Library.⁴⁶

Generally, previous discussion of Gibson's work has not recognised his Australian, and particularly Queensland, regional variations in his application of the modernist aesthetic – he has taken the lessons learnt from past vernacular and instead of simply applying a modern version to those things (e.g. wraparound verandah, lightweight materials or screens), he understood *why* these were used to control light and shade and air (or generally, the connection inside to outside).⁴⁷

Gibson often used frameless windows in his designs to open views and connections with the outside, but also as a way of controlling the environment. The large panes of glass that make up the modern glass wall were really only industrialised from the 1980s in a way that made them safe and reliable as a structural element (such as a non-load bearing wall or doors) so tempered or laminated glass is essential in frameless uses where a large amount of weight has to be self-supporting.⁴⁸ This was used in his various library designs as they required a very controlled environment, so the non-operable glazing works well in conjunction with other controls such as the large overhangs for shade.⁴⁹

In *Life style and the built Environment*⁵⁰, Gibson notes the importance of a verandah and shade in the Australian vernacular, before going on to expand on 19th century designs adapted to the local climate “...fine examples of Renaissance building adopted to Queensland climate by use of deeply recessed and detailed windows and verandahs providing shade to the occupants while, at the same time, richly embellishing the buildings' facades with light and shadow.”

Gibson was keenly aware of designing places for people because it was people who would be using the buildings and places he designed, which he added was all the more important because we spend upwards of 85% of our lives in the built environment.⁵¹

In an interview with former Robin Gibson & Partners employee Bill Heather⁵², he made the observation: “Another thing Robin would do was evolve a solution. He was very into repetition. If he found something that worked, he'd do it again. If he found the perfect way to run windows past a column, it would turn up on another job. To turn the corner on a shopfront and to turn a corner on the working house of the Wheat Board silos, you'll find it's the same detail. It would be thought out to get the neatness that he wanted, but

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he didn't reinvent the wheel every time he did a detail. If you've got something that worked, that's how it's going to be. You had a vocabulary that you could use, and once you got on that wavelength, he'd get to trust you because he knew you understood the language.”

Gibson was named the 1982 Queenslander of the Year and the following year received an Order of Australia. In 1989, Gibson was awarded the Australian Institute of Architect's Gold Medal. In 2000, Robin Gibson & Partners received the RAI A national Lachlan Macquarie Award for Conservation.⁵³

Gibson died at the age of 84 in March 2014.⁵⁴ Gibson's obituary from the ABC⁵⁵ described him as persistent, consistent, predictable and reliable. He could be relied upon to deliver high quality, well considered designs that suited civic and government contracts. Despite a definite modernist leaning, his buildings and designs were easily understood and widely liked, showing that he really understood how people would use them.

DESCRIPTION

Belconnen Library, designed by Robin Gibson & Partners for National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in 1980 and constructed in 1981 is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its Cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, large sheets of glass, plain and plain smooth wall surface.⁵⁶

Client: NCDC

Architect: Robin Gibson & Partners

Consulting Engineers – Structural: Ove Arup & Partners

Consulting Engineers – Services: W.E. Bassett & Partners

Landscape Architects, Hydraulic Engineers (Plaza): D. J. Dwyer & Associates

Quantity Surveyors: Rider Hunt & Partners

Contractor: Concrete Constructions

Precast Concrete: Melocco Bros

Cost (in 1981): \$1,830,000 or \$605/m²

It was of a standard construction for the time, but creatively arranged to create open spaces internally, large external overhangs and arrangements of columns, glass, ribbed ceilings and exposed aggregate to combine in a high level of artist ability. Almost all walls are load bearing, with conventional roof construction. The mix of precast and in-situ concrete panels has been coordinated so that they blend seamlessly in a high-quality finish.⁵⁷

Van der Plaat and Jones⁵⁸ describe the Belconnen Library as a familiar Gibson design with round columns behind glass walls, sandblasted concrete, continuous concrete parapets, deep overhangs, design of horizontal effect, recessed window framing, structural channels internally with services in long tubes, skylights and minimal internal walls; but unusually it has a prominent curved wall, but that would sit well with his pedestrian focused design and the movement of people through the area. He was particularly concerned about texture, with his Griffith University buildings first using what was to become his standard sand-blasted concrete. He would employ repeatable patterns across his works to achieve a crisp, clear form.

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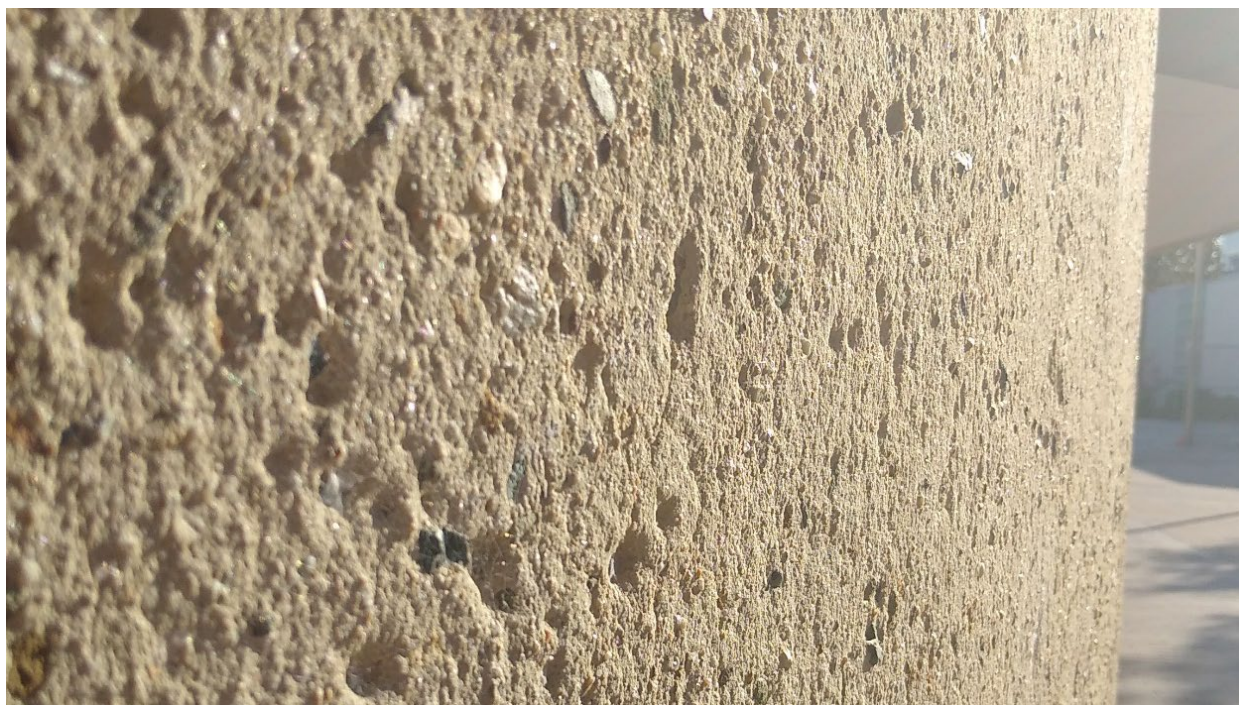


Figure 12 Detail of exposed aggregate sandblasted finish to concrete walls, (ACT Heritage, 2021)

The free-standing library, constructed in off-white in-situ sandblasted, exposed aggregate concrete externally and internally, was designed to be approached from, and appreciated from, all sides in its urban sitting. It is primarily approached along the path on its northern façade that connects the mall to the west and the Chandler Street underpass linking to the educational precinct and University to the east. The facias create deep shadows beneath giving emphasis to the horizontal form of the design, while allowing a play of shadow across the curved and recessed surfaces of the lower facades. The soffits creating the flat surface under the eave are lined with flush jointed fibre cement sheets. The glazing throughout is frameless silicon jointed and the full height glazing has a lower sill formed by a low strip of concrete 'kicker' that allows for a continuous skirt.

The entry foyer is a double height space with a generous lobby area around the front counter. The central loans counter has been removed and replaced many times over as new technologies and best library practices are adopted. The foyer remodelling has included unsympathetic timber screening that is not in keeping with the modern aesthetic of the building and has covered, or required to be removed, the Sally Cleary mural *Horizon* (Figure 10). The library is open plan and the external in-situ concrete finish extends to the interior walls. Generally, the book stacks are located towards the centre of the library space allowing the perimeter areas to be set aside for desks, carrels and small reading areas. The original design separated the adult and children's areas with smaller children's area in the southwest corner around the left of the entry. An adult reading area was located to the right of the entry, behind the northwest curved external wall. This space has had wall partitions installed to create a secure staff area.

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Figure 13 Double height main entry of the Belconnen Library – Eastern façade, (ACT Heritage, 2020)

The western space inside the building is presently used as a reading area for periodicals. The western facade has narrow horizontal mid-level slot glazing while eastern light extends into the space from overhead raised recesses with clerestory glazing. Adjacent to the children’s area, the spaces that project out towards the southern court have raised ceiling and clerestory glazing similar to the western reading area.



Figure 14 Recess along the southern facade for protected full height glazing, (ACT Heritage, 2020)

The southern and western facades have a continuous fascia under which are recessed sections to allow protected full height glazing with views of the park to the west as well as the southern court. Inside each recess, one side of the return wall is curved, referencing the curve of the north east corner of the library, juxtaposed against the other sides straight planes and right angles. The internal sections of the wall match the curve of the stair and contrast with the overall cubic form of the library.

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Figure 15 Double height foyer and the covered bulkhead that held the artwork *Horizon* (ACT Heritage 2021)

Public rest rooms are located adjacent to the entry lobby to service both the library and the upper-level community room. They are approached off the lobby from the library and can also be approached separately off the stair and lift lobby allowing an efficient use of services that can be shared between the Library and the community room or restricted to just the community room entrance for after-hours access.

The structure is set out on a square grid, approximately 45x45 metres, with circular concrete columns supporting the roof framing. The columns are inset from the perimeter fascia except for the northeast corner column that is placed at the external corner for both structural necessity and as a defining design element to the path and library entry. The perimeter columns are placed within the wall along the north façade but are setback from the other facades. The ceiling has a ribbed structure running north-south with the recessed sections housing the air circulation ducting as well as up lighting that reflects into the interior with a diffuse soft light (see Figure 11).

As well as normal 'town' library functions, the building was designed to serve the community, including information and referral services and facilities for community activities with a meeting room on the upper level.

The building is two-storey at the northeast corner to accommodate the community room. The upper-level community room is accessed from the stairs or lift located to the left of the library main entry, then a bridge takes you over the top to the right of the library entrance. This provides an interesting promenade as well as out of hours security. The path has a stainless-steel balustrade along the outer side, while full height glazing along the library side allows a view back down into the library foyer. The railing was extended to full height with a complimentary vertical railing that is continued along the curved glass railing on the corner. The community meeting room has been given added interest with curved concrete walls and ribbon frameless glazing enabling extensive views to the north. A kitchenette is set to one side.

The NCDc planning "...located the library on the nodal point of the pedestrian movement patterns." The interior is designed for maximum flexibility. The integrated duct/light/services are incorporated into the ribbed ceiling at 1.5m centres. The [non-extant] flooring specified a green carpet to link to the outside landscaping. It is horizontally emphasised and design for shadow and light to play of the sandblasted

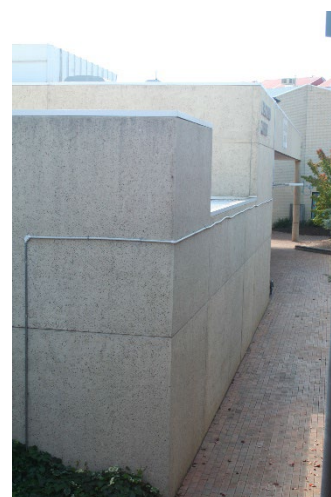
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concrete facades, making the most of the Australian sun. The article describes Gibson as a “space manipulator” and a pragmatist well versed in technical skills, but also artistically knowledgeable.⁵⁹

The AIA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion was won by the Library from ten entries⁶⁰. The jury noted the difficult siting of the Library that was reliant on the surrounding planned development to eventuate, and that its multiple pedestrian approaches weakened its definite front entry. Despite this, it was considered to be an excellent human-scale public building with clever internal spacing. While the Library won the ACT Chapter Enduring Architecture Award, it did not get recognition at the national level for entries for 2010.



Figure 16 Belconnen Library interior, showing the open plan and ribbed ceiling with ducting and lights (ACT Heritage, 2021)



Figures 17, 18 modifications to the restroom area have left their mark, **Figure 19** intrusive external conduit and floodlighting

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Figure 20 Integration of the surrounding environment with the building structure – Northeast, (ACT Heritage, 2020)



Figure 21 Southeast light well with clerestory windows (ACT Heritage, 2021); Figure 22 Northwest light well with clerestory windows (ACT Heritage, 2021)

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While the Belconnen Library does have some affinities with the Brutalist style of architecture, it most strongly identifies with the Late Twentieth Century International Style of architecture as defined by Apperly et al. While the design brief specified that the building had to compliment the Brutalist style Cameron Offices, Gibson's design has a lighter touch. Although concrete buildings are synonymous with Brutalist architecture, they are not unique to that style and were a popular aesthetic for mid-century modern architecture; large-scale concrete buildings are not often seen any more and are of their time⁶¹. Architectural elements of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style displayed by the building include⁶²:

- Broad characteristics
 - **Mostly used for commercial and institutional buildings** – yes, library/public building
 - **Greater sculptural quality than earlier International styles** – yes, includes curving surfaces juxtaposed with right angle, blocky forms and round columns
 - **Increasing use of curvilinear forms** – yes, as above
 - Reinforced concrete members used expressively in response to structural forces - no
 - High-quality 'traditional' materials – no, concrete used rather than stone, tile, wood etc.
- Settings and relationship
 - **Precision** – yes, high quality finish, particularly soffits and edges of panels where concrete edges meet
 - **Sharpness** – yes, as above
 - **Transparency** – yes, glass entrance and large glass sections along all walls provide surprisingly clear and open viewing in and out
 - **Spatial quality considered appropriate to urban settings** – yes, low horizontal emphasis and close design with surrounding landscape allows the building to fit in to its surroundings
- Exterior characteristics:
 - **Cubiform overall shapes often complemented by contrasting non-rectangular shapes and plain smooth wall surfaces** – yes, the whole is 45x45m square in which rectangular roof elements are used along with round columns and curving wall segments for select corners and to create niches along the facades that are juxtaposed with angular returns
 - Structural frame expressed - no
 - Curtain walls and large areas of glazing complemented by contrasting textures – no, does not include curtain walls and uses simple smooth textures of concrete and glass
 - **Cantilevered forms** – yes, 3m cantilever on north and west facades and entrance
 - **Overhangs and external sun control devices integrated in design** – yes, 3m roof cantilever and again with the community room roof cantilever
- Structure and construction
 - **Steel and reinforced concrete frame promoted great height besides supporting glass curtain walls** – partial, uses steel and reinforced concrete, but urban setting required lower height and uses frameless glazing set in concrete walls
 - Use of pre- and post-tensioning facilitated dramatic and attenuated forms - no
- Other qualities
 - **Eschews historicism** – yes, thoroughly modern design, no reference to classical forms or decoration

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Figure 23 Pedestrian Plaza from Chandler Street facing the Belconnen Library (ACT Heritage, 2020)



Figure 24 Pedestrian Plaza from Chandler Street facing the Belconnen Library (ACT Heritage, 2020)

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