



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

CANBERRA OLYMPIC POOL

(Block 7 and (PART) 8 Section 37, CITY)

At its meeting of 13 November 2014 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Canberra Olympic pool was not eligible for provisional registration.

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

HISTORY

Canberra Olympic Pool is a swimming complex designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works, ACT Branch, with the supervising architect R. M. Ure, the engineering designer B. Beresford-Smith, and the administrator of work A. Ferrari, additionally it has been suggested that Ian Slater was also involved in the design (Eric Martin and Associates 2005). It was constructed in 1955. It is an example of an early swimming complex built in the post war period and at a time when there was much public interest in swimming and diving in Australia due to the lead up to the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games (Roberts 2001; Eric Martin and Associates 2005). The complex was officially opened by Mr. A. Fairhall, the serving minister for the interior on 28 January 1956.

Swimming pools are a common feature across Australia with public pools being built in three general periods in NSW and, by extension, the ACT: the inter-war period, the post-war period and the private pools of the 1970s and beyond. The inter-war period of the 1930s, spurred on by the success of Australian Olympic swimmers, was the initial period of building public swimming pools. These facilities were designed for competitive swimming and were usually fenced in and tightly controlled due to the social attitudes of the time. It was during this period that several design features were established that have carried through to today, such as the separation of male and female changerooms (Roberts, 2001). The only example of this era in the ACT is the Manuka Swimming Pool which still contains evidence of these features, and has been updated to modern standards with access to open landscaped areas for recreation as well as the addition of heating to the pool.

The second period of public swimming pools was in the post-war period in the 1950s and 1960s spurred on by the 1956 Melbourne Olympics and Labor government and local councils, among other factors. This period of pool building was part of a larger movement of post-war building that revelled in modernity with new ways of building and changes in social attitudes. The pools from this period changed focus from competitive swimming to leisure activities. The grandstands made way for open areas for relaxing or picnics, there were often other pools for wading or toddler pools, kiosks and club rooms. Swimming was an activity that the whole family could participate in and was particularly popular with children and adolescents. Adolescents in particular were encouraged to participate in recreation at public swimming pools as it was seen as a healthy activity in a controlled environment during a time when parents were concerned over the perceived hedonism of youth (Roberts, 2001). There are several instances of letters to the editor in *The Canberra Times* during the late 1950s and early 1960s complaining about adolescents wearing bikinis, kissing by the pool or other activities deemed unseemly. Canberra Olympic Pool, built in 1955, dates from this period of pool development which has influenced the design as evidenced by the open area design, three pools for different purposes including recreation, landscaped areas for leisure activities, the kiosk space and the architect designed modern style buildings and diving tower.

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Architect designed facilities were common to this period and modern architectural styles used (Roberts, 2001). One of the highest praised swimming facilities from this time is the Melbourne Olympic Swimming Pool which featured a highly acclaimed structuralist style building, albeit in a style restricted to a sporting stadium venue rather than the post-war swimming complex that became so popular after the Olympics. Other comparable post-war swimming complexes in Australia are common for this period (for more examples see Roberts, 2001); two such examples are Auburn Swimming Centre (1959 NSW, Figure 1) and Brisbane Centenary Pool (1959 QLD, Figure 2) which both have open plan landscaped areas with three pools and sculptural reinforced concrete cantilevered diving platforms. They also have modernist buildings housing the change rooms, equipment, etc.



Figure 1 Auburn Pool diving tower (Goldsworthy 1959)



Figure 2 Brisbane Centenary Pool (2008 © The State of Queensland, Department of Environment and Heritage Protection)

It may be arguable that there are better examples of public swimming pools from this era, but the Canberra Olympic Pool is the seminal example. The Pool was completed in 1955 and achieved wide publicity after winning the 1955 Royal Australia Institute of Architects (RAIA) NSW Chapter Sir John Sulman Award for meritorious architecture, which had focussed on recreational and sporting class buildings (RAIA, 1956). The award was shared between the supervising architect R. M. Ure, the engineering designer B. Beresford-Smith, and the administrator of work A. Ferrari (*Canberra Times* 13 September 1956 p.4). The proliferation of modern public swimming pools in the 1950s and 1960s that Roberts (2001) notes only starts towards the end of the 1950s; the few pools he lists that predate the Canberra Olympic Pool follow a more traditional style of design. The other major influencing factor was the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, the introduction of commercial television (which was spurred on by the Games), and Australia's success in the swimming events that year. Whilst these events were influential in spreading the popularity of swimming in Australia, it is unlikely that they influenced the design of the new swimming centre as the acclaimed Melbourne Olympic Pool was a stadium style venue and did not have the family friendly and recreational atmosphere of Canberra Olympic Pool.

Notes on capacities of the pools and the filtration unit available at the National Archive indicate that there were plans for a further indoor pool to be added in the future, but this did not eventuate.

Canberra Olympic Pool is an ACT Government asset. In 2005 a Conservation Management Plan was completed for the place in response to a request for advice in relation to an upgrade proposal and management options.

Canberra Olympic Pool was nominated to the ACT Heritage Register by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA - formally known as the Royal Australian Institute of Architects) in the early 1990s.

The site was inspected by ACT Heritage on 8 September 2014 and photographs were taken and the condition assessed to inform the ACT Heritage Council.

DESCRIPTION

The Canberra Olympic Pool complex comprises three pools, a diving tower and other associated buildings and structures. Each pool is a reinforced concrete tank faced with glazed tiles. The Olympic-sized main pool features starting blocks and lanes that are demarcated by contrasting colours and they are fed by Canberra's main water supply. Situated along the eastern side of the complex is landscaped recreational area consisting of lawn and mature deciduous trees.

The pool complex possesses some characteristics indicative of the Post War International style, such as the horizontal proportions and fenestration of the buildings, the flat roof with curved projecting skylights, the diving tower, balustrades and flagpoles.

The main pool was originally 55 yards long (50.29 m) and its length was later reduced to 50m. There is also a children's pool, measuring 9.14m x 18.29m (30 x 60 feet) in length and a diving pool, 27.43m and around 18.29m (90 x 60 feet) and 4.87m (16 feet) deep.

Associated with the diving pool is a 10m tall tower with two spring boards. It is a cantilevered reinforced concrete structure and is cubiform in shape, with irregular shaped vaults. Its form, smooth wall surfaces and contrasting colour schemes are elements indicative of the Post War International Style (Eric Martin and Associates 2005; Apperly et al. 1994). Based on its attributes, Eric Martin and Associates (2005) consider the structure to be 'impressive' and 'unusual'.

Other associated buildings and structures consist of changing and club rooms, as well as a filtration plant and workshop which extend from the northern to the southwest section of the site. A closed boarded fence shelters the complex from wind.

Since 1955, a number of additions and major alterations have been made to the complex. A kiosk located behind the diving pool was built, while the club rooms along the northern and western sides of the main pool were extended sometime before 1967 (Eric Martin and Associates 2005). The northern change rooms were altered internally to serve other functions, including gym facilities. In 1991, a temporary dome was installed over the Olympic sized pool and the control room located on its southern end, while, the children's pool was covered. Other alterations include the replacement of cloth umbrellas with metal ones.

At the start of 1990 ~250 tonnes of beach sand was imported to create a beach volley ball area, feature four courts, in the landscaped area to the east of the pool.

In 2005, the complex was described to be in 'reasonable' condition, requiring refurbishment and the exterior has retained much of the 'original fabric' (Eric Martin and Associates 2005).

In 2008, the ACT Government funded the refurbishment of the complex, which included the replacement of the Olympic sized pool's temporary dome with a permanent structure (ABC 2008).

Physical condition and integrity

Visual inspection during a site visit on 8 September 2014 by ACT Heritage indicated that the place was in reasonable condition. The assessment takes into account the timing of the visit during which all activities are focused on the covered heated pool with the outdoor areas being subject to winter maintenance.

The main building was in good condition and has been adapted to suit modern facilities, with the east wing being adapted to use as a gym, the main entrance upgraded with modern equipment and a small kiosk, the west wing accommodates male and female change rooms as well as an injury management centre. The external walls of the main building have retained their blue and white diamond pattern, but the repeating of the pattern throughout the rest of the facility is no longer apparent. The front entrance has been enclosed and the diamond pattern side gates are being replaced by automatic doors and glazing in a manner sympathetic to the facade of the entrance vestibule. The original flagpoles have been retained. As these areas are in continual use, they have been well maintained and the adaptive use has not modified the structure in any significant way, maintaining the integrity of the main entrance building.

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From appearance, the Olympic pool seems to be in reasonable condition. The blue tiles are showing wear and age in high traffic areas and the concrete paving, while intact, is also showing its age. The edges of the pool/surrounding paving have been built up to eliminate a small step surrounding the pool. The dome covering the pool serves its purpose well and protects the pool from the elements while providing a heated environment, however it does enclose the pool itself and interrupts the open planning of the complex. The cover includes a heated walkway from the main building/change rooms to the pool area which blocks access to the western areas of the complex. The club rooms to the west, have been extended along the edge of the pool, but are now not accessible to the public and are being used mostly for storage. The filtration room with its window wall are no longer visible from the public areas of the complex. The dome focuses attention to the Olympic pool and segregates the outdoor areas. This has led to the outdoor area becoming neglected and underutilised. One consequence has been the closing of the kiosk which is in a moderate to poor condition as a result.

The children's pool has had a steel-framed cover installed and covered seating built on its northern side. The sides of the pool have been built up, eliminating a small step.

The filtration building has had its facade replaced with more glazing, but as this is not a feature visible to the public the glass has become dirty and several louvres need replacing. The building has been extended with painted concrete blocks to the east so that it now adjoins the kiosk. The filtration unit is based on a gravity fed sand filtration method which does not meet the turnover rate required by current health guidelines and it will require replacement if the facility is to remain operational.

The landscaped areas have been disturbed by recent earthworks, but should recover well. The landscaping at the front of the complex is in good condition and retains much of the original landscaping design that emphasizes the Post War International style of the complex.

The outdoor light poles have been replaced with more focused modern lighting.

The diving tower is in reasonable condition and at the time of the site visit was awaiting maintenance work before the start of the summer season.

The original small kiosk is no longer in use due to aging facilities and poor location; the kiosk facility has been combined with the front desk in the foyer.

The manager's residence retains this use.

Throughout the complex the original blue and white colour scheme has been retained and extended to the newer elements such as the dome.

Sport and Recreation Services engaged an engineer to assess the condition of the pool in 2009 which noted that the "...Canberra Olympic Pool was beyond its useful design life" (pers. comm. Jenny Priest, Director, Sport and Recreation Services, August 2014). It is also known that there are a number of leaks causing a significant water loss. Remediation works have been undertaken to repair a number of the leaks. However, given the age and the inaccessibility of some aspects of the infrastructure without major excavation/redevelopment and cost, it has not been possible to identify or remediate all potential leaks, and there is no guarantee that the remediation works will resolve the leaks. The situation continues to be closely monitored.

The current condition of the pool infrastructure is acceptable, noting that the usual design life for facilities like this is 50 years. Additionally to the leak issues outlined above, it is also likely that many of the associated equipment and facilities will soon require significant upgrade or replacement. The long term viability of the Canberra Olympic Pool is currently being assessed by Sports and Recreation Services in the context of broader considerations for the development of future aquatic facilities in the ACT, and also in the context of a range of proposals that are presently being investigated as part of the City to the Lake Project.

SITE PLAN



Figure 3 Canberra Olympic Pool nomination boundary.