

Australian Capital Territory

# Heritage (Decision about Registration for Gus' Café, City) Notice 2011- 111

Notifiable Instrument NI 2011 - 111

made under the

*Heritage Act 2004* section 42 Notice of Decision about Registration

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**1. Revocation**

This instrument replaces NI 2009 – 649

**2. Name of instrument**

This instrument is the Heritage (Decision about Registration for Gus' Café, City) Notice 2011 -

**3. Registration details of the place**

Registration details of the place are at Attachment A: Register entry for the Gus' Café, City.

**4. Reason for decision**

The ACT Heritage Council has decided that Gus' Café, City meets one or more of the heritage significance criteria at s 10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*. The register entry is at Attachment A.

**5. Date of Registration**

10 March 2011

Gerhard Zatschler  
Secretary  
ACT Heritage Council  
10 March 2011



ACT Heritage Council

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HERITAGE REGISTER  
(Registration Details)

For the purposes of s. 33 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, an entry to the heritage register has been prepared by the ACT Heritage Council for the following place:

- **GUS' CAFÉ at Bunda Street, Civic**

#### DATE OF REGISTRATION

Notified: 11 March 2011      Notifiable Instrument: 2011 - 111

Copies of the Register Entry are available for inspection at the ACT Heritage Unit. For further information please contact:

The Secretary  
ACT Heritage Council  
GPO Box 158, Canberra, ACT 2601

Telephone: (02) 13 22 81      Facsimile: (02) 6207 2229

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## IDENTIFICATION OF THE PLACE

- Gus' Café, Bunda Street, Part of Block 1, Section 47, City, ACT.
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## STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

Gus' Café is an example of one of Canberra's cultural heritage places illustrating intangible heritage values. It is not the physical fabric of the building that represents its heritage value. It is the history of the place and activity conducted there over many years that gives the Gus' Café site its strong historic cultural and social heritage significance for the local community.

From 1960 a café has operated on the site known today as Gus' Café and since 1970 the café function has included outside dining, pioneered at this site by café owner Gus Petersilka. Subsequent owners of the café have deliberately retained the name Gus' out of respect for Gus and his battle. The name Gus' has become synonymous to the period of social and cultural development of Canberra in the 1970s which saw the city centre acquire visible social vibrancy with the development of a café society.

Gus' Café has strong and special associations with its former proprietor and important Canberra personality, Gus Petersilka. Although Gus died in 1994, his endeavours to instigate and develop open air dining in Canberra were recognised in his lifetime and his legacy lives on and continues to be acknowledged. He was named "Canberran of the Year" in 1978; the Canberra Recognition Committee had a memorial plaque placed in the pavement outside the Café in 1998; a street in Gungahlin, Petersilka Street, was named in his honour in 2002, and he was publicly named as one of the 100 most important and influential Canberrans by Canberra's local ABC Radio 666 in 2003.

Gus' Café remains today one of Canberra's popular meeting and dining spots and the style of outside dining established there in the 1970s, as a result of Gus Petersilka's persistence in the face of bureaucratic opposition, has spread to almost every Canberra café which can fit tables and chairs on the pavement.

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## FEATURES INTRINSIC TO THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLACE

Features intrinsic to the heritage significance of the place which require conservation include:

- The intangible social value attributed to the location Gus' café
  - The physical public recognition of the historical significance of Gus' as currently provided by the bronze sidewalk plaque
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## REASON FOR REGISTRATION

*The place has been assessed against the heritage significance criteria and been found to have heritage significance against three criteria (c, d and h) under the ACT Heritage Act.*

*The views of interested persons have been sought and there is support for the registration.*

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## ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

Pursuant to s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, a place or object has heritage significance if it satisfies one or more of the following criteria:

- (a) it demonstrates a high degree of technical or creative achievement (or both), by showing qualities of innovation, discovery, invention or an exceptionally fine level of application of existing techniques or approaches;**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (b) it exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group;**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (c) it is important as evidence of a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function that is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest;**

Gus' Café is historically important as the first café which offered outdoor dining in the Civic area of Canberra in a five year campaign conducted by café owner Gus Petersilka during the early 1970s to change policy by the local government bureaucracy which opposed this concept. The café name of "Gus", and the continuing practice of open air dining offered at this café location, have become synonymous with that style of outdoor public dining now commonly found and popular throughout the city today. Gus' Café is strongly linked to the phase of cultural and social development and change in Canberra whereby the perceived "dead" centre of the city acquired "heart and soul" through provision of public outdoor, and therefore highly visible, café/restaurant facilities as social meeting places.

The place meets the threshold for heritage listing in relation to this criterion.

- (d) it is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations;**

The struggle by Gus Petersilka to introduce European style outdoor dining to Canberra has become part of local urban folklore, both acknowledged and appreciated by the Canberra community. He not only pursued the right to continue his outdoor café, much frequented and widely appreciated by the Canberra community, he also focused on wider social and cultural issues with the express aim of making Canberra a better place to live and work in, to visit and enjoy.

The café name "Gus's" has been deliberately retained by subsequent owners of the café site, both out of respect for Gus Petersilka's determination to establish outdoor dining in Civic, and because of the café's style and location's strong link with the 1970s period of establishment of pavement cafés in Canberra. The bronze sidewalk plaque placed in the pavement outside Gus' Café four years after the death of Gus Petersilka and funded by the public is demonstrative of the social value attached to Gus' Café by the Canberra Community.

The place meets the threshold for heritage listing in relation to this criterion.

- (e) it is significant to the ACT because of its importance as part of local Aboriginal tradition**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (f) it is a rare or unique example of its kind, or is rare or unique in its comparative intactness**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (g) it is a notable example of a kind of place or object and demonstrates the main characteristics of that kind**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (h) it has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history**

Gus' Café has strong and special associations with Gus Petersilka who operated a café in the 1970s/early 1980s on the site occupied by the present Gus' Café and he endowed the business with his name. His determination to place tables and chairs on the footpath outside his café is a well-known episode in Canberra's social and cultural development and initiated the trend for this type of social dining that is now commonplace. Although Gus died in 1994, his endeavours were recognised in his lifetime and his legacy lives on and continues to be acknowledged. The current proprietor continues his tradition of outdoor café dining and has kept the café name. In other ways, too, his contribution to Canberra's social and cultural development has been, and continues to be, acknowledged. He was declared "Canberran of the Year" in 1978, the Canberra Recognition Committee had a memorial plaque placed in the pavement outside the Café in 1998; a street in Gungahlin — Petersilka Street — was named in his honour in 2002 and he was publicly named as one of the 100 most important and influential Canberrans by Canberra's local ABC Radio 666 in 2003.

The place meets the threshold for heritage listing in relation to this criterion.

- (i) it is significant for understanding the evolution of natural landscapes, including significant geological features, landforms, biota or natural processes**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (j) it has provided, or is likely to provide, information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the natural or cultural history of the ACT because of its use or potential use as a research site or object, teaching site or object, type locality or benchmark site**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (k) for a place—it exhibits unusual richness, diversity or significant transitions of flora, fauna or natural landscapes and their elements**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

- (l) for a place—it is a significant ecological community, habitat or locality for any of the following:**

- (i) the life cycle of native species;**
- (ii) rare, threatened or uncommon species;**
- (iii) species at the limits of their natural range;**
- (iv) distinct occurrences of species.**

The place is assessed as not meeting this criterion.

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**SUMMARY OF THE PLACE  
HISTORY AND PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION**

The Petrie Plaza Building where Gus' Café is located was constructed in 1960 and with its completion a lease was granted on September 6<sup>th</sup> to establish a café called the Prague Coffee Bar on the Bunda Street corner site known today as Gus' Café.

In February 1970 Augustine (Gus) Petersilka acquired the lease and changed the name of the coffee lounge to Gus'. Gus had emigrated to Australia from Austria and wanted to introduce a relaxed social European style of outdoor dining to Canberra's city centre. The introduction of this concept of outdoor café in the Canberra urban environment generated ongoing friction between Mr Petersilka and the authorities that opposed what was then an innovation in the city.

From the first, when Gus set up tables and chairs outside his café during business hours in March 1970, the bureaucracy opposed him, while public popularity of the new style outdoor café venue with its relaxed and friendly environment grew. The views of the Department of the Interior regarding the Café as a health hazard were regarded as ridiculous by many, especially Gus, who responded with a public campaign to establish pavement cafés and outdoor public dining as normal in the urban area. In April 1970 permission was granted to Gus for a six month trial of his outdoor coffee lounge concept, but with the authorities imposing regulations and conditions concerning patron numbers; regulations which Gus ignored immediately increasing the three tables to seven. The café popularity grew along with its seating and by September 1970 a further six-month trial was agreed to with Gus applying to leave tables outside in the evening by February 1971.

In September 1972 Gus applied to erect an overhead shade to cover what had developed into an outdoor eating area to seat fifty-five, and inadequately served by umbrellas. The authorities (now in the form of the National Capital Development Commission) denied permission for the canopy but in September 1974 Gus proceeded with the building of posts for his desired shade cover despite the threat of legal action by the authorities. In November the authorities responded by confiscating Gus's chairs, tables and shade posts giving rise to a vocal public debate (including supportive public petitions) regarding outdoor public dining in Civic.

The publicity and public support for the concept of Gus' Café resulted in the provision of licences for footpath café use in November 1974 and the approval for a shade canopy at Gus' was approved in November 1975.

Gus was defiant, determined and obstinate in pursuing what he believed in. He was a master at publicity, constantly speaking to the press, writing letters and placing advertisements. He stated to *The Canberra Times* in May 1979:

*I believe in Canberra, I've been here since 1962, I'm naturalised and I've fought for many principles that have become accepted in this city.*

Gus not only pursued the right to continue his outdoor café, frequented and appreciated widely by the Canberra community, he also focused on wider social and cultural issues with the express aim of making Canberra a better place to live and work in, to visit and enjoy. Gus was instrumental in the transformation of Canberra's cultural urban landscape from one exhibiting a 'dead centre' with a highly controlled empty environment to one with a 'heart and soul' and visible social life.

Gus finally sold the café that bore his name and embodied his aspirations in 1982. The subsequent proprietors continued his tradition and kept the café name. In other ways his contribution to the development of Canberra have been, and continue to be, acknowledged. In 1978 he was declared Canberran of the Year and the Canberra Recognition Committee had a memorial plaque placed in the pavement outside the Café in 1998; a street in Gungahlin — Petersilka Street — was named in his honour in 2002 and he was publicly named as one of the 100 most important and influential Canberrans by Canberra's local ABC Radio 666 in 2003. Almost every Canberra café now has tables and chairs on the pavement.

Gus Petersilka's dogged determination to ensure that the outdoor café society would forever remain a way of life in the National Capital inspired others to establish outdoor dining. At Gus' funeral in 1994, his

lawyer and friend, Bernard Collaery said “Gus leaves Canberra ahead of itself...and through sheer effort and controversy he gained recognition and a place in Australian history” (*Canberra Times* 27/10/1994). Bill Tully, also on the Canberra Recognition Committee and an organiser of the plaque, said that Gus was the obvious choice for their first plaque because “we look around at the centre of Civic and Canberra in general, and we see the result of Gus’ efforts” (*Canberra Times* 12/2/1998).

There is also public recognition of Gus Petersilka and his contribution to the cultural development of Canberra to be found on the Internet encyclopaedias Wikipedia and Answers.com while this history is also provided on the canberracafe.com site, which lists Canberra cafés and restaurants.

Gus' Café is located on the corner of Bunda Street and Garema Place, Civic, in the heart of Canberra city's retail shopping and restaurant/café hub. The café is located on the ground floor within a complex of shops at the Garema Arcade in the Garema Centre building (formerly Petrie Plaza building) that dates from 1960. A café, named “The Prague Coffee Bar”, opened in this corner location soon after the building was completed and the café known as “Gus” began operation on the same site in February 1970 when Augustine (Gus) Petersilka obtained the property lease. A café/restaurant bearing the name Gus' has been operating on this site ever since.

The café consists of a small corner space in the north-west of the building fronting onto Bunda Street, the internal Garema Arcade walkway and open walkway at the north side of the building. The café shop has a glass window façade around three sides, and two covered outdoor dining areas, one on the footpath of Bunda Street and another along the western side of the shop. The space within the building has undergone several renovations by various owners over the years since it was first established in 1970 and little remains of the original fabric. The glass window façade is, however, still intact and bears the name of “Gus' Café” in gold lettering, although sections of the glass have been replaced. The colour scheme of gold and brown on the windows and interior has been retained for several years although its link to the original colour scheme is tenuous.

The outdoor dining facility has also undergone several structural changes to comply with health, safety and building regulations over the years. Originally it consisted of tables and chairs arranged on the footpath aligning Bunda Street immediately outside the café and by 1975 a temporary covered structure was erected. A covered structure has been retained, although it has undergone several changes since first erected to comply with regulations. It now consists of a semi-open structure with metal framework (approx 5m x 15m), a white pagoda-style roof, waist-high metal fence in filled with rectangular metal sheets at ground level and glass inserts at upper level with removable transparent plastic sheeting in between. Tables and chairs also line the pavement immediately next to the glass window façade. The third outdoor dining facility along the western wall of the shop has a similar sheltering structure along its outer boundary with clear window upper area bearing the business name of Gus' and a canvas covering overhead. It is comparatively new and does not correspond with the original seating area Gus Petersilka established at his café.

In 1998 the Canberra Recognition Committee chose to honour Gus Petersilka with its first award and placed a bronze plaque with an image of Gus (by well-known Canberra cartoonist Geoff Pryor) in the pavement outside Gus' Café. This honour was bestowed upon Gus and his café as the character of the café and the lifestyle encouraged by it had by then become a regular feature of Canberra's social and cultural life. The plaque reads:

*Gus epitomised the emerging soul of Canberra.*

*His constant representations on behalf of the people of the city produced the establishment of the outdoor Viennese cafe throughout Canberra.*

*He was the scourge of the establishment and a crusader of the people.*

*His friendly hospitality and fierce determination has been indelibly stamped on the character of Canberra. May his energy and laughter live on in this city.*

*Canberran of the Year 1978*

## REFERENCES

ABC Radio 666 website: Important and influential Canberrans, 4 July 2003.

ACT Heritage Library, Images ACT, Gus Petersilka photographs.

ACT Legislative Assembly, Hansard, 20 February 2002.

ACT Legislative Assembly, Hansard, 8 November 1994 on the Death of Mr Gus Petersilka.

ACT Legislative Assembly, resolution AR 2002-1: Public Placed Names - Gungahlin - Petersilka Street.

Canberra & District Historical Society files on Gus Petersilka and Gus' Café.  
Canberra Times articles on Gus Petersilka from 1979 to 1994.

Lloyd, Rebecca 1993 *Conservation Study (Gus' Café)*, for University of Canberra Cultural Heritage Management Course, Canberra.

National Library of Australia biographical files on Gus Petersilka.

Ozlife - Australian Biography Index online, National Library of Australia.

Personal Communication with Alena Almassy and Setita Rockman.

Petersilka, Gus, personal files belonging to Setita Rockman (proprietor of Gus' Café after Gus departed)

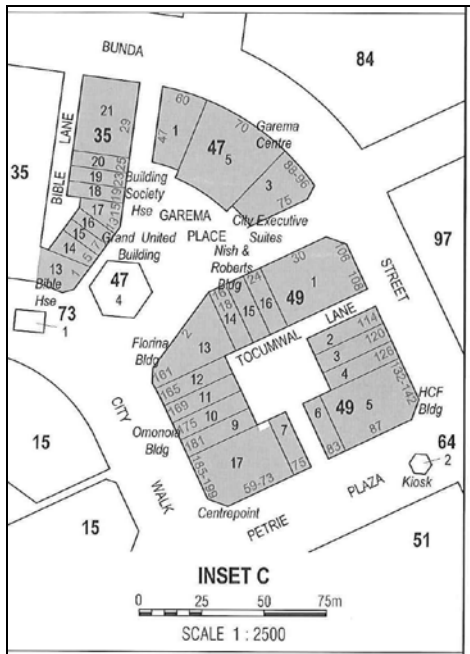
Wikipedia site viewed on 25/7/2006 at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gus's>

Answers.com site viewed on 25/7/2006 at <http://answers.com/topic/gus-s>

Canberracafes.com.au site viewed on 25/7/2006 at <http://www.canberracafes.com.au>

## 3. IMAGES AND MAPS





Block 1 Section 47 City, Gus' Café, Bunda Street, Canberra City.





Gus Petersilka outside Gus' Café, Bunda Street, Canberra  
Photo - ACT Heritage Library (c1974)



Gus' Café, Bunda Street, Canberra  
Photo – M. Park (2004)



Garema Place outdoor cafés, Canberra  
Photo – M. Park (2004)