



## ACT Heritage Council

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### NORTHBOURNE FLATS

#### (Block 2 Section 8 BRADDON & Block 1 Section 57 TURNER)

At its meeting of 22 May 2014 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Northbourne Flats (the Flats) were not eligible for provisional registration. The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Flats against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### HISTORY

#### **Public housing in Canberra and the city's early growth and development**

Public housing forms a crucial element in Canberra's history. Unlike other cities, where the main focus of public housing is to provide a minimum level of accommodation for those who cannot afford to provide it for themselves, in Canberra, a large program of public housing established from 1927 has provided housing for all classes of society. It was not until 1972 that the number of privately built dwellings surpassed the number built by government (Wright, 2000:vi).

The Government provided housing in all manner of forms: hostels, hotels, detached residences, and flats.

Well before Parliament's first sitting in Canberra in 1925, the Federal Government knew that it would need to provide housing for those relocating to the nation's capital.

In 1912 the Minister for Home and Territories stated that 'it appears that the Government must, therefore, be responsible for housing its officials who are transferred from Melbourne, and who are on a different footing from the commercial population, and will suffer some hardship and inconvenience on their compulsory transfer to the seat of government' (Wright, 2000: 6).

The Federal Capital Commission (FCC) was established in 1925 and set about providing housing for the expected influx of construction workers and public servants. In the year to 30 June 1927 the FCC approved construction of 545 Government houses. A year later 646 public servants had been transferred to Canberra with office and residential accommodation provided. This included houses, hotel and hostel accommodation (Wright, 2000: 17).

The Depression was accompanied by a downturn in the transfer program and with the change of Government in 1930, the FCC was wound up and Canberra reverted to divided departmental control (advised by a partly elected ACT Advisory Council), a state of affairs that was to continue until 1958.

By the late 1930s the piecemeal approach to development by the Department of Interior and other responsible agencies was having significant adverse impacts. In February 1939, there were 400 people on the waiting list for government housing in Canberra. Administration was not coping with Canberra's rate of growth (Wright, 2000: 28).

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During World War II construction of Government houses in Canberra was halted leaving Canberra with an estimated shortage of 500 houses through the latter part of the war.

Putting still further pressure on the housing situation, Cabinet decided in 1948 to recommence the program of transferring the public service from Melbourne to Canberra (Wright, 2000: 29).

In 1955 the Administrative Building (the first public service office block of significant size) was nearing completion. In that year the Government planned to transfer 1,500 public servants from Melbourne to Canberra over three years, and the Department of the Interior estimated a need for 4,000 new dwellings by 1958.

A quick-fix solution was needed. Blocks of flats, which had previously been considered as the cause of congestion and unhealthy conditions, suddenly found favour (Wright, 2000: 29).

### **Construction of housing flats in Canberra**

*Information contained in this section has been largely drawn from the 2011 Philip Leeson Architects Pty Ltd study and Wright, 2000 (see references).*

A number of other flats were built in Canberra, under different development commissions, in the same period as the Northbourne Flats (the Flats). Those completed before the Flats, under the National Capital Planning and Development Commission (NCPDC) include:

- Griffith Flats (1948)
- Braddon and Reid flats (1951)
- Ainslie Flats (1952) and
- Allawah and Bega Courts (1956/57).

Those completed after the Flats, under the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) include:

- Gowrie Court (1959)
- Lachlan Court (1959)
- Stuart Flats (1959)
- Red Hill Housing Precinct (1961)
- Northbourne Housing Precinct (1962)
- Kanangra Court (1965) and
- Jerilderie Court (1977).

All these flats were well designed, and the only example that has been demolished is Lachlan Court.

All were constructed as a result of a desperate shortage of housing in the capital during the post-war years, when increasing numbers of public service administrative staff were transferred to Canberra.

Government departments found it difficult to attract suitably skilled staff, as new recruits faced the prospect of spending many months in hostels, away from their families, until a rental house became available. To compound the problem, since World War II building costs had escalated dramatically, there were shortages of materials – which led to rationing arrangements – and a lack of tradesmen.

After it became clear that the construction of single housing was not going to meet the growing waiting list for accommodation, alternative housing models were considered. The idea of constructing blocks of residential flats in key city locations found favour with the administration, and by 1948 the first of these, located on Canberra Avenue in Griffith, was completed.

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The Griffith Flats, as they became known, consisted of 48 two-bedroom units on a site bounded by Canberra Avenue, Eyre Street, Oxley Street and Dawes Street. The units were spread over eight separate two-storey blocks, each of which faced onto a road frontage. The central area between the blocks contained facilities for car parking and clothes drying.

Soon after the Griffith Flats were completed, the Department began the design of two similar groups of flats to be built on either side of Ainslie Avenue. These became known as the Braddon Flats and the Reid Flats.

The Braddon Flats, located on the northern side of Ainslie Avenue and facing onto Elimatta, Bateman and Gooreen Streets, consisted of 48 two-bedroom flats. The Reid flats, directly opposite and facing onto Elimatta, Allambee and Gooreen Streets, comprised 20 one-bedroom units and 28 two-bedroom units. Both the Braddon and Reid flats were completed in 1951.

During the following year, 1952, the Department completed the first stage of the Ainslie Flats. These consisted of 32 one-bedroom units and 56 two-bedroom units built around car parking and private amenity areas on a site in inner Ainslie, not far from the Braddon and Reid Flats.

The Griffith, Braddon, Reid and Ainslie Flats were all variations of a similar theme. They all consisted of combinations of two-storey blocks that faced onto street frontages, regardless of solar orientation. Each block was rectangular in form, and contained one or two shared entrance porches – whose articulation was often the only variation in an otherwise planar wall surface. The rear of each block faced onto the central, shared communal area. Inside, the blocks contained a variety of modest, one-bedroom and two-bedroom units.

The building blocks that formed the flat complexes were all constructed of brickwork. In some cases this was left as face brickwork, while in other complexes – such as the Braddon and Reid Flats – it was rendered. Roofs were all tiled, the only variation being in the employment of hipped or gabled roof forms.

With the earliest of these flats – the Griffith Flats – being designed in the 1940s, it is not surprising that the design of these early Canberra flats was largely based on pre-World War II building types. Through all of these developments the influences of a reduced Inter-War Georgian Revival Style can be detected. This is evident in the overall restrained approach, and in the pitched roofs, simple, rectangular massing, regularly spaced window openings and symmetrically placed entrances. Symmetry and regular fenestration of the Braddon and Reid Flats elude to the other popular Inter-War style in Australia – Mediterranean – though the lack of any rounded arches or Mediterranean detailing makes this connection less apparent.

In keeping with the austerity of the post-war period, there were no elaborate details, classical mouldings, arches or shutters on these flat buildings. The entrances were, however, successfully emphasised and well integrated into the façade designs. All of these early flats make understated, but well mannered contributions to their local streetscapes. In style and architectural intent these early post-World War II Canberra flats were rational, simplified designs that owed much to the economic climate into which they were born. Designed to meet stringent cost and time restraints, their understated, reductive forms anticipated the modernist influenced architecture that was to appear in later flats.

The construction of the Allawah and Bega Courts in 1956/57 demonstrated a shift in design intent. They each consisted of eight three-storey blocks of two-bedroom flats. They presented to Cooyong Street as six blocks of 18 flats raised on columns over car parks with laundries under two blocks. Behind this row of blocks, is a further ten blocks of 12 flats on the ground forming rectangular

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courtyards between. The need for an appropriate architecture for this large commission, and important location, provided an opportunity to shift away from architectural styles previously employed on housing projects and to experiment with elements and concepts of International Style design and construction techniques. The complex demonstrates characteristics of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) including a cubiform overall shape, overhang for shade, plain, smooth wall surfaces, cantilevered balconies and contrasting texture between brick and rendered facades.

In 1959 a further four public housing projects were completed, Gowrie Court, Lachlan Court and the Stuart and Northbourne Flats.

Gowrie Court in Narrabundah, consisted of 72 two-bedroom units in series of separate, three-storey blocks that ran parallel with each other for optimum solar orientation. This was in contrast to the early 1950s flats that were two-storeys high, and flanked all four boundaries of their sites regardless of individual orientation. Other evidence of the shift to a more modern, International Style-influenced approach is exemplified by the very low pitch to the roof, accentuating the rectangular, cubistic form of the blocks. In another modernist tendency, the crisp, planar form is offset visually by the white-painted cantilevered balconies, which regularly punctuate the main facades.

Lachlan Court in Barton, of concrete construction, consisted of 118 bedsitters over four separate buildings, one one-bedroom caretakers' cottage, a restaurant, central laundrette and 41 garages on a site bounded by Brisbane Avenue, Macquarie Street, Darling Street and National Circuit. In 1999 Lachlan Court was sold by the ACT Government and subsequently demolished for redevelopment.

The Stuart Flats in Griffith consisted of 29 bedsitters and 117 two-bedroom flats on a site bounded by Captain Cook Crescent, Stuart Street, Light Street, Evans Crescent and the boundaries of St Paul's Cathedral, the Russian Embassy and private flats. The units are spread over 12 separate blocks varying in height from two to four storeys plus part basement with some blocks raised on concrete frames to provide covered car parking. The central open space between the blocks contains additional car parking and drying areas however landscaping is minimal. There is little evidence of any strong concept, architectural style or a considered approach to site planning in the design of these buildings despite being designed in the highly regarded office of Spencer, Hanson and Partner.

The Northbourne Flats consisted of 24 three-bedroom, 154 two-bedroom and 70 one-bedroom flats located on two sites, in Turner and Braddon, facing each other across Northbourne Avenue. The development on the Turner side of Northbourne Avenue is bounded by Condmine Street, Forbes Street and Greenway Street and the development on the Braddon side of Northbourne Avenue is bounded by Hentry Street and the boundaries of Haig Park and the Canberra Rex Hotel. The complex consists of two building blocks types, both 3 storeys high – those that contain two-bedroom flats with the one-bedroom flats attached by glazed links (Image 4) and those that contain three-bedroom flats (Image 3). The Flats exhibit some features of the Post-War International Style (1940-60) such as cubiform overall shape, plain, smooth wall surfaces and exposure of structure frames however the integrity of the style has been diminished through the absence of a significant number of key features detailed under '**Description**'.

The completion of the Northbourne Flats was quickly followed by another project along the main avenue, the Northbourne Housing Precinct in 1962. This precinct, stretching some 500 metres along Northbourne Avenue in Dickson and Lyneham, consisted of five building types comprising one, two, three and four storey buildings. A variety of housing types are represented in the precinct including bachelor flats, two-storey paired houses and maisonettes (terrace/row house). The precinct, designed in Post-War International Style (1940-60), by renowned architect Sydney Ancher

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of Ancher, Mortlock and Murray, who is acknowledged as a leading figure in the modern movement in Australian architecture.

Construction was completed in 1965 on Kanangra Court in Reid which originally comprised 118 bachelor flats over seven three-storey blocks however the flats have since been modified into two-bedroom flats. Bounded by Ainslie Avenue, Limestone Avenue, Allambie Street and Goreen Street the buildings are set in an open landscaped area with covered carports and screened drying areas. The design of Kanangra Court took a different architectural and site planning approach to the developments located on Northbourne Avenue. The design demonstrated some domestic qualities of private houses associated with the Sydney Regional Style (1960- ) such as scale, footprint shape, massing, proportion of windows, detailing and building materials.

The construction of Jerilderie Court in Reid in 1977 marked another shift in design intent for public housing flats in Canberra, demonstrating a move to designing in response to a places' context rather than a conscious exercise in any specific architectural style. It contains a total of 62 dwellings within nine blocks ranging from two to three storeys in height. Dwelling types include three-bedroom townhouses, single-storey garden units and maisonettes with car parking provided at ground level under some blocks, in group carports and in open parking spaces. The units are bounded by Ainslie Avenue, Allambee Street, Doonkuna Street and Elimatta Street.

### **The planning and development of the Northbourne Flats**

*Information contained in this section has been largely drawn from the 2011 Philip Leeson Architects Pty Ltd study and Wright, 2000 (see references).*

Pressure to increase housing density in response to the ever-growing waiting lists for housing influenced the design of the Northbourne Flats (the Flats), in planning and construction from 1952 until 1959. The Flats were designed to accommodate families with young children, childless couples and singles, in preparation for the transfer of Defence Department personnel to Canberra from 1959.

The Flats were designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works (the Department), Canberra, in association with the Sydney-based architectural firm Budden, Nangle and Michael in 1956. The design process for the Flats was long and convoluted, with a number of alternative site planning proposals being considered and rejected before the final solution was reached. The Department's brief to the architects provided a guide to the design intent and site planning:

*The objective is therefore to design the blocks freely placed on the site to achieve an open "garden" layout with "C" blocks placed across the vistas to screen the service areas, garages, and laundries, etc. The planning is then directed to achieving the most suitable orientation for each flat, with a minimum of shadowing from adjoining blocks. ("Conditions of Design and History to Date" A976 1956/430)*

The concept of the Flats buildings being set in an open garden landscape was important from the beginning as were attempts to prioritise north-facing blocks however this raised a dilemma for the planners in relation to the street presence of the south-facing walls. Another consistent theme throughout discussions was the importance of the location of the site on Northbourne Avenue and the presence and contribution of the buildings to this main avenue.

In August 1955 Budden, Nangle and Michael forwarded completed sketch plans to the Department.

The building layout produced was a series of 'H' shaped footprints, with open spaces between the

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verticals of the ‘H’ becoming large, semi-enclosed open public spaces that extend to the public domain resulting in the dominant characteristic presented to Northbourne Avenue one of openness.

Due to the high demand and shortage of bricks in Canberra at the time, it was intended that bricks would be used only for end elevations, or where required for structural reasons, while other walls would be of precast concrete construction. The precast slabs were cast in the Monocrete factory in Canberra, using a combination of colourful graded river shingle from the Nepean River in New South Wales, and crushed granite from Victoria. Further variations in architectural surface treatment that add to the lively nature of the external composition are the use of “Tyrolean”-type render in some situations, (including the end walls of the three-storey blocks), and the presence of fabricated “box section” aluminium window units.

### DESCRIPTION

The Northbourne Flats (the Flats) are located on two sites facing each other across Northbourne Avenue. One site is in the suburb of Turner, while the other is in Braddon. The Flats comprise twenty 3-storey blocks. Blocks 1-12 are located on the Turner side, while Blocks 13-20 are on the Braddon side. The total accommodation is 248 flats, in a combination of one, two and three-bedroom varieties. There are 24 three-bedroom, 154 two-bedroom and 70 single-bedroom flats. The Flats consist of two building block types—those that contain two bedroom flats, and have one-bedroom flats attached by glazed links, and those that contain three-bedroom flats. Both are 3 storeys high.

The site consists of 14 repeated blocks of flats, arranged in pairs, at regular intervals across the site. The building layout is a series of ‘H’ shaped footprints, with open spaces between the verticals of the ‘H’ becoming large, semi-enclosed open public spaces that extend to the public domain resulting in the dominant characteristic presented to Northbourne Avenue one of openness.

The Flats exhibit some features of the Post-War International Style (1940-60) such as cubiform overall shape, plain, smooth wall surfaces and exposure of structure frames. The integrity of the style however has been diminished through the absence of a significant number of key features such as Corbusian window motif, cantilever elements and contrasting non-rectangular shapes. Furthermore, those features that are present have not been fully committed to, such as the overall cubiform is diminished by the presence of a low pitched roof and the minimal presence of exposed structural frames.

The attributes of Post-War International Style the Flats partially demonstrate include:

- Cubiform overall shape;
- Exposure of structural frames;
- Curtain walls;
- Overhangs for shade;
- Plain, smooth wall surfaces; and
- Contrasting texture.

However, the Flats ability to fully demonstrate Post-War International Style are diminished by:

- Absence of Corbusian window motif;
- Absence of cantilever elements;
- Absence of contrasting non-rectangular shapes;
- Absence of sun-control devices;
- Absence of large sheets of glass (the glass walls in the stairwells is conventional 1950s design using small panes of glass in an aluminium frame);
- Absence of flat roofing, diminishing the quality of the Cubiform shape;

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- Absence of a true plain wall surface;
- Absence of a true curtain wall (the glass walls in the stairwells is conventional 1950s design using small panes of glass in an aluminium frame);
- Minimal expose of structural frames, restricted only to parking under crofts and certain elevations; and the
- Token nature of overhangs.

The general structure is concrete piers and beam undercroft, concrete floor plates, cavity brick wall construction with panelised infill and timber roof framing. Facades are finished using either aggregate precast slabs, 'Tyrolean'-type render or brickwork.

In addition to exhibiting some features of the Post-War International Style, the Flats are an example of medium density public housing in a landscape setting.

The landscape setting of open garden courts express principles of Modern garden design including:

- Non-symmetrical single plantings of medium-large trees;
- Clean expression of horizontal surfaces such as grass;
- Uncluttered shrubberies; and
- Geometric pathways.

The block layout creates repeated landscaped courtyards to Northbourne Avenue with large mature deciduous trees and expanses of grassed area bisected by diagonal footpaths. The rear of the block layout, facing Henty and Forbes Street, present smaller landscaped spaces, containing fenced children's playgrounds, and has a stronger presence of hard surfaces including car park spaces.

### **Physical condition and integrity**

An external inspection of the Flats was conducted by the ACT Heritage Unit on 23 April 2014. Overall the Flats remain relatively intact in terms of physical condition and integrity.

The Precinct displays layers of maintenance work most likely generated at tenancy turnover times, periodic inspections, accidental damage, vandalism, weather and the expected wear and tear. Maintenance appears to have been conducted in a sympathetic manner. Areas requiring further maintenance work include:

- removal of graffiti to brick walls; and
- flaking paint to entrance porches;

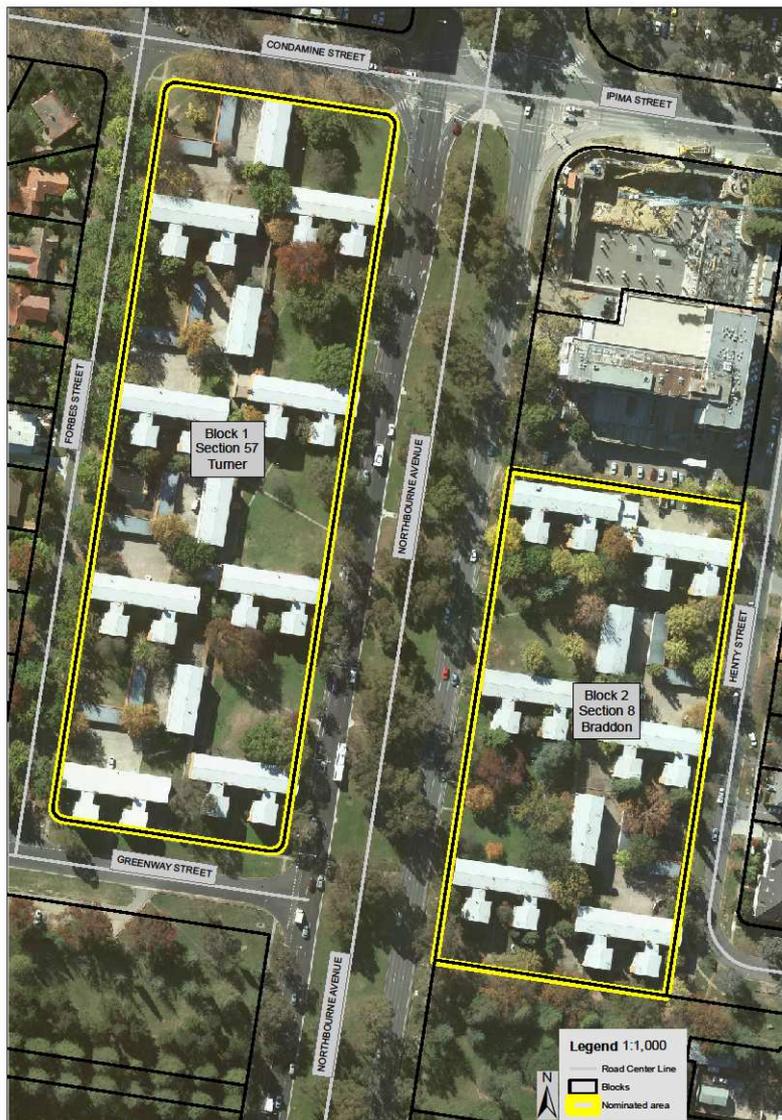
Several alterations have been made to the Flats (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011) including:

- replacement of original concealed gutters and downpipes, roof decks, fascias and cappings;
- conversion of heating boilers from oil to gas;
- installation of new exterior lighting; and
- installation of a new play structure.

The original landscaped courtyards to Northbourne Avenue with large mature deciduous trees and expanses of grassed area bisected by diagonal footpaths remain true to their original design intention. The trees appear to have matured well and overall the grounds appear well maintained.

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### IMAGES



**Image 1.** Northbourne Flats, nominated area.



**Image 2.** Northbourne Flats. View from Northbourne Avenue looking north-west.  
(Source Milton Cameron 2011)



**Image 3.** Northbourne Flats, two-bedroom block on left, three-bedroom block on right.  
(Source Milton Cameron 2011)

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**Image 4.** Northbourne Flats. Typical one-bedroom blocks, with south face of two-bedroom block in between. (Source Milton Cameron 2011)



**Image 6.** Northbourne Flats, 1958  
(Source: NAA, A7973, INT528/6)



**Image 5.** Northbourne Flats. Typical two-bedroom blocks. (Source Milton Cameron 2011)



**Image 7.** Northbourne Flats, 1960  
(Source: NAA, A1200, L34193)



**Image 8.** Northbourne Flats, 1967 (Source: NAA, A7973, INT973/8)



**Image 9.** Aerial view Northbourne Flats, 1962  
(Source: NAA, A1500, K8161)

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