



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION 8 WESTGARTH STREET (BLOCK 16 SECTION 47, O'CONNOR)

At its meeting of 6 February 2020 the ACT Heritage Council decided that 8 Westgarth Street, O'Connor was not eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for 8 Westgarth Street, O'Connor against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

Canberra's development was interrupted by the Great Depression, two world wars, and the materials and labour shortages of war that endured into the 1950s. Throughout the early development of the city, the supply of accommodation for construction workers and public servants was a constant challenge, as it needed to be built as required; including during peaks, for example when parliament was moved to Canberra from Melbourne, and when departments and public servants were relocated from Sydney or Melbourne.

In Canberra, new accommodation for workers and public servants was supplied mostly by the Commonwealth through provision of purpose-built public housing. This was unlike other parts of the country where public housing was supplied as a welfare measure for those who could not afford to purchase a house. It was also often the case in Canberra that the houses built by the government were later available for purchase by their tenants (Phillip Leeson Architects: 2011).

From the 1920s several key agencies were charged with overseeing Canberra's progress in relation to the Griffin Plan. Their tasks included facilitating or influencing the type, design and location of accommodation built. The agencies and the duration of their tenure is as follows:

- 1921 – 1924 Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC);
- 1925 – 1930 Federal Capital Commission (FCC);
- 1938 – 1957 National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC); and
- 1958 – 1989 National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) (National Capital Authority: 2019)

Of the agencies above, the National Capital Authority (NCA) website (2019) articulates their functions as follows:

- The role of the FCAC was to advise the Minister of Home Affairs on the construction of Canberra and review the Griffin Plan;
- The FCC was charged with the construction and administration of Canberra, with a primary role to relocate Parliament including moving public servants and departments to the capital;
- The NCPDC was to act as an advisory body to the Minister of the Interior to safeguard the Griffin Plan and maintain high aesthetic and architectural standards worthy of a National Capital; and
- The NCDC's role was to plan, develop and construct Canberra as Australia's National Capital (National Capital Authority: 2019).

Whilst the Canberra agencies were charged with effecting the suitable development of the city, other already established Commonwealth departments, usually with head offices in Sydney or Melbourne, were involved in design and construction. For example, the Department of Works and Railways (DWR) during their tenure from 1916 to 32, prepared plans for the provisional Parliament House (Old Parliament House) plus retail trading blocks in Manuka. Additionally, the DWR appears to have devised housing plans for one bedroom cottages with plans called 'W & R D1-2'. During the NCPDC advisory period, which is when 8 Westgarth Street was designed and constructed, there existed an unwieldy three-way relationship between the NCPDC and the Commonwealth Departments of the Interior and Works and Housing. The Department of Works and Housing had a head office in Melbourne and a local office in Canberra;

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which is where the plans for 8 Westgarth Street were drafted by them (Archives ACT: 2010; Phillip Leeson Architects: 2011: p 22).

In the earliest days of building Canberra, construction workers resided in temporary camps near their worksites. During their tenure, the FCAC (1921 to 1924) commenced building hotels to accommodate public servants, which was a task the subsequent FCC (1925 to 1930) continued. The hotels built by these two agencies included Hotel 1 (Hotel Canberra), Hotel 2 (Hotel Kurrajong), Hotel 3 (Hotel Ainslie, Gorman House) and Hotel 4 (Wellington Hotel). Each of these, except for the demolished Hotel Wellington, is now listed on the ACT Heritage register (National Archives of Australia 'Federal Capital Advisory Committee' 2019; NAA FCC 2019).

Following on from the FCAC, the FCC implemented the popular 'Garden City' urban design approach to Canberra's development and built cottages in Canberra's early suburbs using the designs of their own architects. The FCC's plans, prefixed with 'FCC' included 26 designs, the most popular of which were 'FCC 4' and 'FCC 9'. The FCC's implementation of 'Garden City' principles and their cottages are preserved within numerous, now heritage listed housing precincts in Ainslie, Barton, Braddon, Kingston, Forrest, Griffith and Reid (NAA 'Federal Capital Commission' 2019; Archives ACT 2010: p 2).

In 1930 with the onset of the Great Depression, the FCC was dismantled by the Commonwealth. The Depression and then World War II slowed but did not stop Canberra's construction. Following the war, Canberra's population increased substantially, making the need for new accommodation pressing. At the same time that the need was greatest, the ability to supply accommodation was hamstrung by the materials and labour shortages of war. Additionally, in Canberra, the lack of a mature private construction industry meant the bulk of new accommodation continued to be supplied by the Commonwealth. In Canberra, it was not until 1972 that the number of privately constructed dwellings surpassed the number built by government (Phillip Leeson 2011).

In the post war years, the Department of the Interior determined to meet the housing shortage, in Canberra and elsewhere, with relocated and prefabricated housing. A first supply of transportable homes from near Sydney and the Riverina were moved to Canberra in 1946 and from 1948 houses from the Tocumwal Air Force Base near Albury, were relocated to the Canberra suburbs of Ainslie and O'Connor. In Ainslie, the 'Tocumwals' were placed throughout the suburb; in O'Connor they were arranged in a precinct, which is now listed on the ACT Heritage register. From around 1953 Riley-Newsum prefabricated homes, manufactured in London and shipped to Australia in large timber crates, were erected in the Canberra suburbs of Ainslie, Deakin, Duntroon, Narrabundah, Mt Harman, Fairburn, Mt. Stromlo and O'Connor. Monocrete homes, another prefabricated option, were erected en-masse in O'Connor from 1951.

The NCPDC was not enamoured of any of the Department's hasty solutions the post-war housing crisis. They felt the Riley-Newsums compared unfavourably to orthodox housing, but resigned themselves to the multiplication of 'inferior structures', advising the homes should not be located on main avenues or in the best areas. Despite efforts to increase housing stock, in 1955 there remained around 3,000 families and individuals on the public housing list (Phillip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.176; ACT Government, Fairbridge Crescent Ainslie; NAA website 'Post War Years One Step Forward', 2019; Swan Basics Tocumwal Housing website 2019; NCA 2019; NAA website 'Post War Years One Step Forward', 2019).

Early housing in O'Connor

8 Westgarth Street is located on Section 47, Block 16 in Canberra's inner north suburb of O'Connor. Useful information about 8 Westgarth Street and other O'Connor properties is held in the 'Government Property & Tenancy Registers 1925 to 1968' on the Archives ACT website. The register lists tenants' names, rental details, type of house, block/section/division (suburb) and address of Government housing in the ACT up to 1968.

The register entry for 8 Westgarth Street shows its availability as a rental rebate house (subsidised housing) from 15 June 1949, managed by the Department of the Interior, Property and Survey Branch. A *Canberra Times* article "After 19 years, no rose garden in sight at heritage nominated O'Connor house" dated 20 February 2019, shows 8 Westgarth Street remained public housing until March 2018 when the Community Services Directorate sold the property into private ownership (Canberra Times: 2019).

Housing became available in O'Connor from 1948. The availability to lease 8 Westgarth Street from 1949 therefore makes it one of the earliest homes available in the post-war suburb of O'Connor and contemporaneously available with the relocated Tocumwal houses. As mentioned previously, the Tocumwal Housing Precinct, which is located near 8 Westgarth Street, is on the ACT Heritage Register. Part of the citation for the precinct is as follows:

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‘The Tocomwal Housing Precinct in O’Connor is significant as an outstanding example of low cost pre-fabricated housing, which was constructed in Canberra after World War 2. ... The cottages are of distinctive design types and limited geographically to the O’Connor Precinct and a small area in Ainslie. ... The Precinct remains the most intact example of this style of housing and is unique in Canberra for its urban planning, landscaping and social history.’ (ACT Government, 1988)

The Tocomwal Archive (2019) website, provides information regarding the Tocomwal Housing Precinct and a snapshot of life in O’Connor when the houses were first occupied, which is when 8 Westgarth Street was first leased. Extracted from the website are the quotations from some of the first residents in the Tocomwal cottages:

- Of the Tocomwal cottages, they were the ‘very first things to be built past the pines’ (Haig Park). There was no road beyond Haig Park – they’d get through on tracks. From Haig Park to the end of Turner was dirt.’
- ‘You had to go to Civic or Kingston for a reel of cotton until Cosier’s store was built – it was built the year we arrived. It was good to get the preschool, and when St Josephs was built my daughter could walk rather than catch the bus to St Pat’s.’
- ‘It rained a lot in that winter and the mud and dampness was a worry to everyone. Our driveway became an absolute bog ...’
- ‘The area which later became Peel Street was occupied by builders’ huts and pools of water, while the houses on the eastern side were completed. North of Macarthur Avenue was a farm occupied by Mrs Shumack. Sheep roamed about where the O’Connor tennis courts now stand.’
- ‘It seemed to rain for weeks and the area was a mass of yellow mud. As more houses were completed and families arrived – most with small children – we became a close knit community.’
- ‘Few had cars – we walked to Civic to shop. Groceries were delivered by the Civic shops. A greengrocer called in the street weekly – ‘fresh food people’ in a truck’ (the Tocomwal Archive; 2019 <http://www.swanbasics.com/index.html>, 2019)

In the book *Canberra 1913 – 1953* Gibbney (1988) includes a snippet of life in early O’Connor, setting the scene as follows, the ‘inhabitants of the hostels faced all the trials of community living, sometimes in substandard accommodation, while those who had to settle in the raw, hastily built new suburbs had their own grounds for complaint. Professor Marcus Oliphant was concerned about what he saw as the declining standards evident in the new suburb of O’Connor on the ground level ground below his elevated house, and complained in a letter to the *Canberra Times* about “the ruthless destruction of every living tree to make room for regimented hutments of substandard wooden houses, with gardens too small to accommodate trees of any size, facing roads lined with rows of stiff, exotic trees...” (Gibbney 1988: pp 270 – 272)

Brick House Type 218

ACT Archives ‘*Government Property & Tenancy Registers 1925 to 1968*’ documents 8 Westgarth Street as a “brick house type 218, without a garage and with a shed”. A search of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) website using the phrase “Canberra housing residence type” and the date range ‘1938’ to ‘1957’ reveals plans for over 100 house types built by the Department of Public Works and Housing during the NCPDC era. A search through the plans reveals most are small two or three bedroom cottages, with the three bedroom cottages usually having a floor area of just over 1000 square feet.

The same NAA search “Canberra housing residence type” reveals two sets of architectural drawings for “Brick House Type 218”, both developed by the Department of Works and Housing. One of the plans shows two options for the house “Roof plan hip roof” and “Roof plan gable roof”. These plans also show alternate front and rear entrances for the house type, based on elevation. 8 Westgarth Street was built with a hip roof and without the front and rear alternate entrances. The other plan shows that “Residence Type 218” has a total floor area of 1114 square feet. Images 4 and 5 show these plans.

It is difficult to definitively determine how many different house types and how many “brick house type 218s” were built by the Department of Public Works and Housing during the NCPDC era, especially after the war. An examination of resources held by the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and Archives ACT, however, does provide useful information for contextualising 8 Westgarth Street as a 218 type, as follows:

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- An NAA search using the term “Canberra housing site plans” reveals a plan called “Canberra Housing – Site Plans for 23 Concrete Houses at Section 47 O’Connor and Section 53 Turner”. The plan shows 8 Westgarth Street as a ‘218’ house and additionally shows three other ‘218’ houses. In Section 47 the 218s are located on blocks 7, 13 and 16. In Section 53, a ‘218’ is located on block 4. There are also three ‘215’s and three ‘219’s, all of which are brick. Another brick type house is also evident, however its inscription is illegible. As noted in the title, the other houses are planned as concrete and they show styles ‘B’, ‘C’, ‘D’, ‘E’ and ‘F’. This plan is shown in image 6.
- The Archives ACT *‘Government Property and Tenancy Registers from 1925 to 1968’* documents tenancy information for public housing in the ACT for 35 suburbs. In a search through almost 400 records for O’Connor, only one ‘218’ was located – that being 8 Westgarth Street.
- The Archives ACT *‘Index of Applications for the Purchase of Government – Owned Cottages 1950 – 1951’* is a record of applications to purchase government built and owned cottages across inner north and south suburbs. The index records applications for the purchase of 326 residences, of which six are recorded as ‘218’s.

DESCRIPTION

8 Westgarth Street was sold by the Community Services Directorate of the ACT Government in March 2018 and the Domain.com.au sales record for 8 Westgarth Street remains online with images of the interior and exterior of the house. Images of the house shows the windows have been modified from the original sash windows, that all the wet areas (kitchen, laundry and bathroom) have been modified from the original to a very basic style. The images show a non-descript front and back yard, with no rose garden in the front yard, or cottage garden in the back yard. In the backyard is a brick BBQ ad wooden shed.

Physical condition and integrity

8 Westgarth Street retains its original size and form and has not been extended, remodelled or knocked down, as many buildings in O’Connor have been. Its interior has been modified from the original as outlined above and its windows are not original. The nomination application received in 2000 noted of the garden; “The gardens are in their original state. The front garden exhibits a rose garden with rose plantings dated to circa 1948. The back garden is enhanced with a cottage garden as well as an original semi-detached garden shed”. As of December 2019 there is no rose garden.

SITE PLAN



Image 1 8 Westgarth Street site boundary

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IMAGES



Image 2: This image from ACT Archives shows an aerial view of O’Connor during its construction around 1952. The main road running at an angle from the bottom of the image to the left hand side of the image is Macarthur Avenue. Westgarth Street is not in the image. (https://www.archives.act.gov.au/featured/tenancy_registers/oconnor)

Capital Value		Annual Rental	DESCRIPTION	Date of Completion	Ref. No.	COST	TOTAL
155		6 4 0	BALKA HOUSE TYPE 218 WITHOUT GARAGE WITH SHED	15-6-49		2495	
155		7 15 0	fly-Access to windows not fitted	12-6-53	107	32	2527
310		15.50				5054	

Frontage.....ft.....ins. 0218.
 1 1 5 2 2180 49 2495 REI
 LAND 1 1 5 2 BUILDINGS 250

Image 3: This is an image snipped from the Property and Tenancy Register, showing 8 Westgarth as a ‘Brick House Type 218’.

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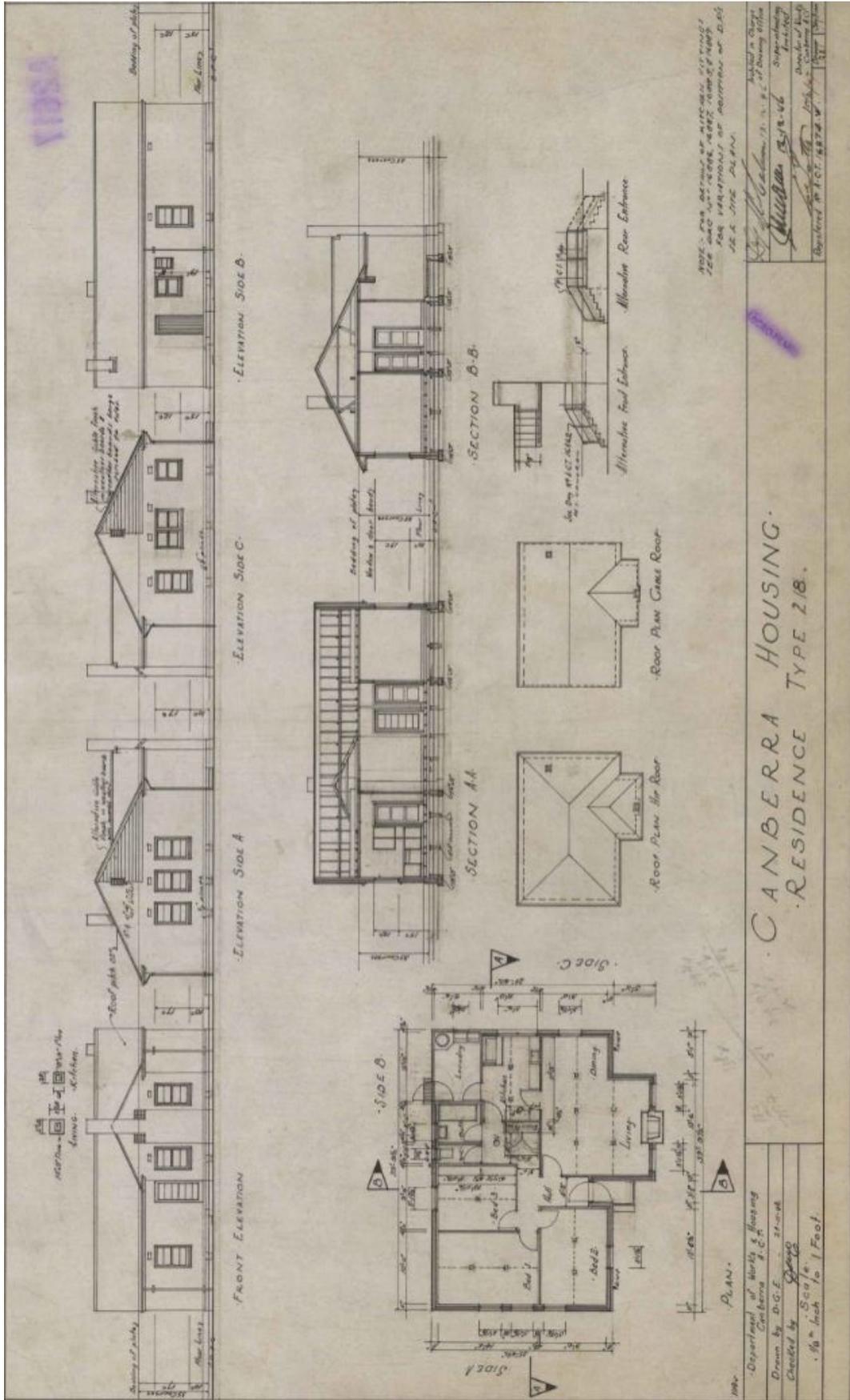


Image 4: These plan drawings from the Department of Works and Housing dated 1946 – 1948 show two variations of the House Type 2018, one with a hip roof and another with a gable roof. 8 Westgarth was built with a hip roof.

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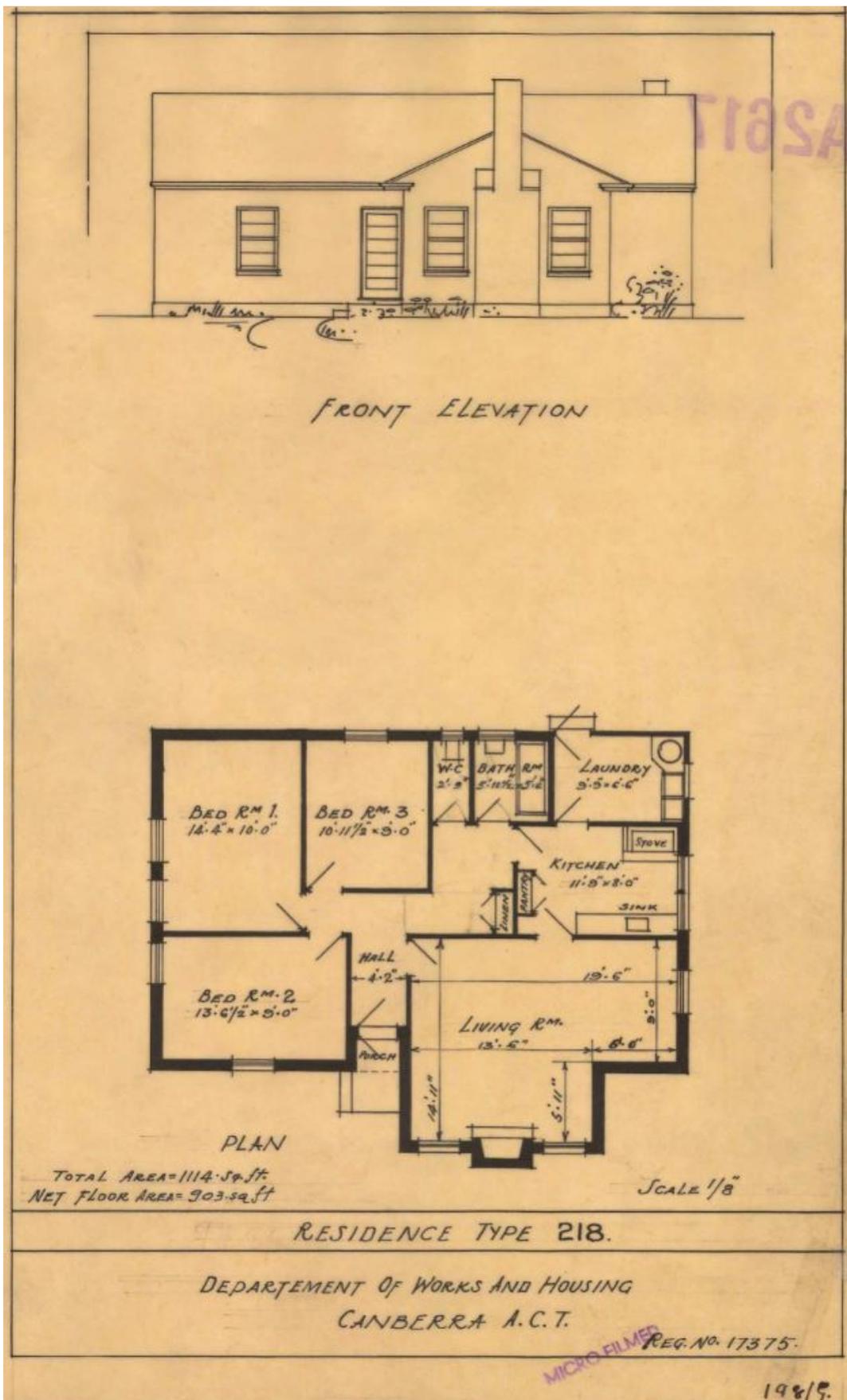


Image 5: This is another plan drawing of Residence Type 218 from the Department of Works and Housing. This drawing shows a gable roof.

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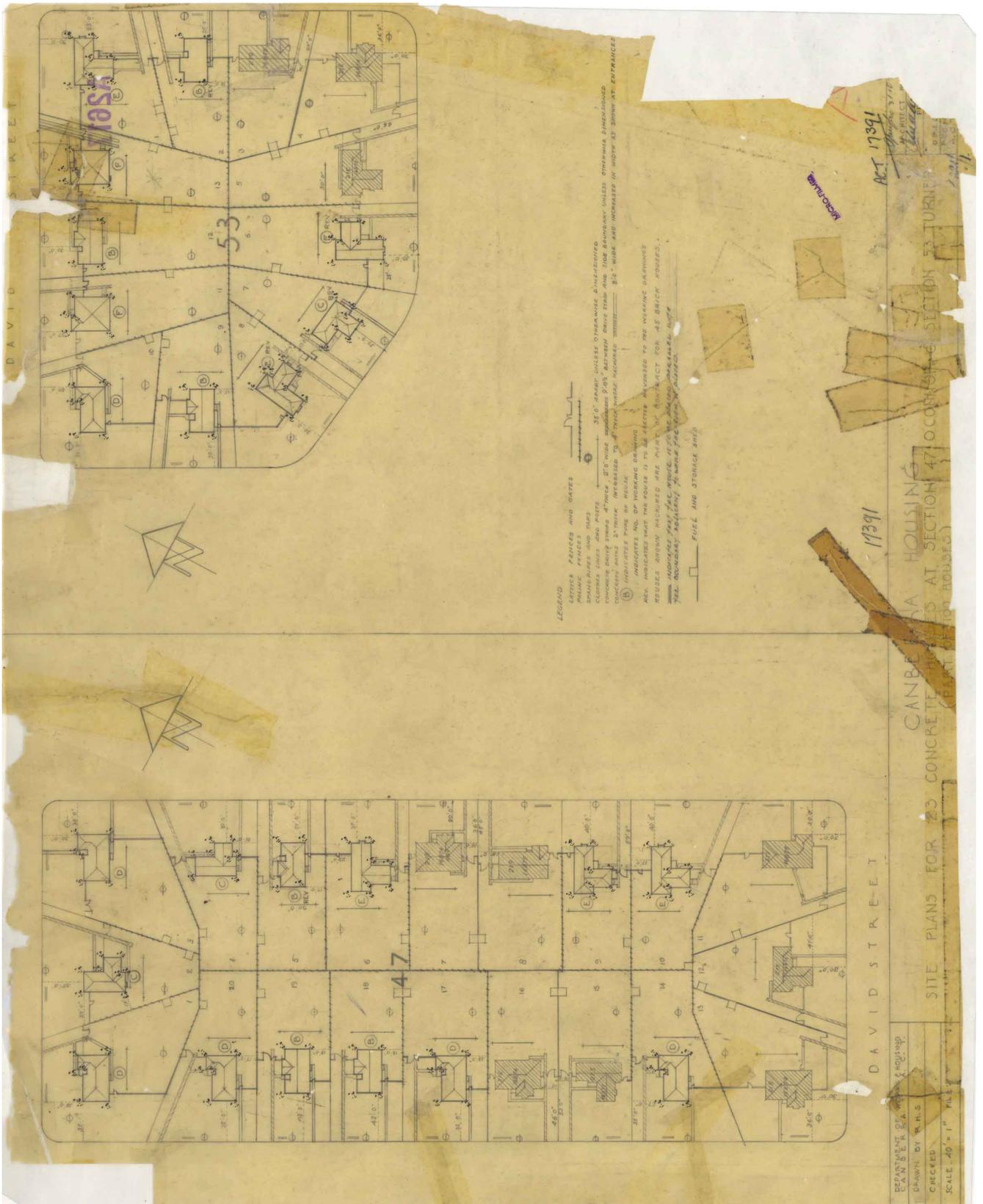


Image 6: Plan drawings from the Department of Works and Housing showing house styles 'B' 'C' 'D' and 'E.'

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Images 7 and 8: The above two images are from Domain.com.au dated approximately March 2018 showing two views of the front of the house.

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Image 9 and 10: From Domain.com.au dated approximately March 2018 showing two views of the backyard of the property.

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Image 11 and 12: From Domain.com.au dated approximately March 2018 showing the kitchen and bathroom, clearly modified from the original.

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Image 13 and 14: From Domain.com.au dated approximately March 2018 showing the laundry modified from the original and the lounge room.

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Image 15 and 16: From Domain.com.au dated approximately March 2018 showing two of the bedrooms.

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Image 17: From Domain.com.au dated approximately March 2018 showing the third bedroom.

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REFERENCES

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ACT Government (date?) *Tocumwal Housing Precinct*

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https://www.archives.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/562528/Applications_to_purchase_1950-51.pdf

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