



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION GRIFFITH FLATS (BLOCK 1 SECTION 21, GRIFFITH)

At its meeting of 13 February 2024, the ACT Heritage Council decided to register the Griffith Flats.

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

HISTORY

The first decade after WWII in Canberra was marked by a dearth of public housing due in part to shortages in materials and labour. Discussion of the need to increase density had been on the National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC) agenda since their establishment in 1939. This became more pressing as the war ended, as personnel returned and there was renewed impetus to transfer government to the official capital. The NCPDC commenced its advisory work at the onset of WWII, however residential development was only sporadic and ‘ad hoc’ (NCA, 2023) until the appointment of the NCDC in 1958. As such, comparatively very little remains.

The Griffith Flats (Section 21, Griffith, October 1948), illustrate the first Federal Government flat complexes constructed after WWII in Canberra, and represent a significant departure from what the government had built prior to that time. Prior to WWII most housing in Canberra was of a low-density design. Notable exceptions included Barton Court, which was a private development designed by Kenneth Oliphant and built in 1934, and the development at Section 2, Griffith, behind the Manuka shopping precinct, of a lower density. The Griffith Flats was a medium density development covering an entire Section with 48 flats facing street frontages, shared laundry facilities and common courtyard and parking areas.

This multi-block complex was the product of the post WWII program to move a substantial number of public servants from Melbourne to Canberra. Gibbney (1988) and Wright (2000) both note the scarcity of materials and workers, contributing to the design of a reinforced concrete structure with brick cladding and internal wood framing. Wright also noted that the flats were originally intended to be a set of 40 in Narrabundah, but existing services made it more expedient and economical to build in Griffith.

The shortage of accommodation for public servants together with a national shortage of building materials post-WWII, was addressed by the Federal Government. One of several solutions was to quickly build, for the first time in the national capital, large complexes of government flats using apprentices as part of the contract. This complex set the precedent for further large-scale government flat developments, such as Braddon Court in 1951 and Ainslie Flats in 1952.

The Canberra Times on 30 December 1947 notes, “The erection of the block of modern flats overlooking Kingston Oval is another phase which may receive further consideration by the authorities in their efforts to provide adequate housing as rapidly as possible.”

Shortage of housing at the time was noted as a barrier to attracting both government and non-government employees, including defence personnel with the Commissioner of the Public Service Board, Mr F G Thorpe reporting to a meeting of Permanent Heads of departments to discuss the housing crisis: “Officers are

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reluctant to accept transfer or promotion to Canberra because of the difficulties in the way of securing suitable accommodation, particularly housing” (Greig, 1996: 9; Wright, 2000). A total of only 248 housing units were delivered to the Department of Interior in the period 1947-48, during this post-war housing crisis, many of which were pre-fabricated houses for construction workers with virtually no private house construction underway (Greig, 1996; Wright, 2000: 27-28). The tender to construct the Griffith Flats was won by J. L. Chapman for £76,790, but with the later caveat in a letter from Chapman that a reasonable extension of time may be required given the difficulty in acquiring manpower and materials, despite the use of apprentices in an effort to address this issue.

The Griffith Flats appear to have been for general housing, as opposed to other developments that were designated for particular groups of people (e.g. labourers, various levels of public servants, defence personnel, etc.). Over the past 75 years a wide cross-section of the public have lived in the Griffith Flats, including senators, butchers, clergy, high commission officers from other countries, lecturers and many others.

The Griffith Flats occupy the whole of Section 21, Griffith and are sited adjacent to Kingston Oval; part of the heritage registered Kingston/Griffith Housing Precinct. Nearby are the heritage nominated Hotel Kingston (1936) and the privately designed and built Sutherland apartments (1939; redeveloped in 2001), both pre-war. By occupying the whole of Section 21, the design of The Griffith Flats was able to accommodate eight buildings, each facing one of Canberra Avenue, Eyre Street, Oxley Street and Dawes Street. The design followed Garden City principles, allowing for a generous central common area comprising landscaping, laundry, car parking, children’s playground and some space for small garden areas, allowing the internal amenities to be deliberately screened from view from the street. Parking areas are now roofed with a modest steel carport structure. The laundry buildings still stand on the site, housing more modern facilities, although the clotheslines are original hoists.

As Canberra grew and private enterprise expanded, there was less of a need for government housing to provide accommodation to encourage people into the burgeoning capital. As private housing became more available, the government-owned buildings started to be used for social housing, switching the focus of government housing from making up for a shortfall, to one of need. The Griffith Flats were designated as ‘aged persons housing’ under the NDC and carried this through to the 2010s.

Today the Griffith Flats present in a landscaped setting, little altered on the exterior, their construction and maintenance having stood the test of time over 75 years. There are well-preserved internal features such as the stairwells. The flats have outlasted many more recently built government flats complexes such as Frazer Court and Stuart Flats and are in much better condition than the public housing flats built in both Ainslie and Braddon constructed later in the 1950s. The Griffith Flats offer a well-preserved example of how ACT public housing transitioned to social housing, which still works today.

Completed in 1948 as Canberra’s first government flats, the Griffith Flats reflect a new type of housing provision locally and the move to higher-density forms of group housing as a response to the quickening pace of government transfers to the Federal Capital from the late 1940s and early 1950s as part of the development of public housing both locally and nationally.

Architectural Style

The Griffith Flats were designed in the Architecture Section of the Department of the Interior working alongside the NCPDC. The architecture produced was generally well-mannered, high-quality and with a timeless appeal. Leeson (2012) observes that the Georgian Revival Style is evident in the overall restrained approach, in the pitched roofs, simple, rectangular massing, regularly spaced window openings and symmetrically placed entrances (Leeson, 2012: 58).

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Shortages of building materials and other post-war austerity measures are evident in the absence of elaborate details, classical mouldings, arches or shutters. The entrances were however emphasised. Leeson (2012) states: “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 developments such as the Allawah and Bega Courts, the Northbourne Flats, and the Northbourne Housing Precinct” (Leeson, 2012: 58).

The different architectural styles that have been suggested to describe the Griffith Flats are included below with those features that appear in the Griffith Flats appearing underlined. This comparison concludes that the Griffith Flats fall into the Inter-war Georgian Revival Style (after Apperly, et al. 1994).

Inter-war Georgian Revival Style (Apperly, et al. 1994:150-153)

- Broad characteristics
 - Recreation of the old colonial Georgian style
 - Clarity
 - Simplicity
 - Reasonable proportions
 - Restrained and simplified classicism
 - Predominantly domestic scale, but occasionally used for buildings of modest size
- Settings and relationships
 - Often freestanding in formal garden setting
 - Buildings make typically Georgian good-mannered contributions to the scale and detail of the streetscape
- Exterior Characteristics
 - Symmetry
 - Regular repetitive fenestration
 - Plain wall surfaces of fine face brickwork or stucco
 - Classical elements (e.g. orders, porticoes, pediments, aedicules, etc.) used for emphasis
 - Simple roof configuration
 - Stone trim
 - Twelve-pane Georgian windows often with louvred shutters
 - Semi-circular headed windows often used in windows of principal storey
 - Occasional use of Palladian window motif
 - Entrance doors with sidelights and fanlights/transom lights
- Structure and Construction
 - Traditional bearing walls
 - Timber floor and roof construction
 - Steel and reinforced concrete construction with brick facing in commercial buildings
- Other Qualities
 - Styled favoured by academically trained architects for well-to-do clients
- Style Indicators (*italics* are indicators peculiar or vital to understanding the character of the style)
 - Rectangular, prismatic shape
 - Symmetry
 - Classical order
 - Quoining
 - Portico
 - Pediment
 - Paned double-hung window of vertical proportion
 - Shutter
 - Round arch
 - Trabeated loggia

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- Entrance given more high-style treatment
- Sidelight
- Fanlight or toplight
- Decorative fanlight motif
- Boxed eaves
- Cupola
- Hipped roof
- Round-headed window to ground floor
- Cornice
- String course
- Fine-textured roof
- Pilaster
- Plinth
- Breakfront

Inter-war Functionalist Style (Apperly, et al. 1994:184-187):

- Broad Characteristics
 - Radical
 - Progressive image
 - Appealing to dynamic commercial organisations and non-conformist individuals
 - Simple geometric shapes
 - Light colours
 - Large glass areas
 - Fenestration often in horizontal bands, giving 'streamlined' effect
- Settings and relationships
 - A comprehensive style applied to all building types, both free-standing and façade-emphatic
 - Buildings on corner sites exploited three-dimensional expression
- Exterior Characteristics
 - Asymmetrical massing of simple geometric shapes
 - Contrasting horizontal and vertical motifs employing large areas of glass, ribbon windows, glass bricks and porthole windows
 - Plain surfaces, light-toned cement or face-brick
 - Flat roofs concealed behind parapets
 - Decorative emphasis provided by integrated lettering and parallel line motifs
- Structure and Construction
 - Steel and reinforced concrete used to achieve wide spans, continuous windows and cantilevered balconies, hoods, roofs, etc.
 - Extensive used of metal-framed windows
 - Smooth surfaced facing materials popular (e.g. faience, polished granite, etc.)
 - Vitrolite structural glass employed
- Other Qualities
 - Emphasis on leanness and efficiency made it ideal for hospitals
- Style Indicators
 - *Asymmetrical massing*
 - Simple geometric shapes
 - Columns not emphasised or behind glass
 - *Long horizontal spandrel or balcony*
 - *'Ribbon' window*
 - *Roof concealed by parapet*
 - Cantilevered balcony or hood
 - Stairs expressed by vertical emphasis

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- Semicircular wing
- Rounded corner
- Metal-framed window
- Corner window
- Curved glass
- 'Vitrolite' structural glass

Garden City Movement

The Garden City Movement is a method of urban planning that was initiated in 1898 by Sir Ebenezer Howard in the United Kingdom. Garden Cities were intended to be planned, self-contained communities surrounded by "greenbelts", containing proportionate areas of residences, industry and agriculture. Howard's idealised Garden City would house 32,000 people on a site of 6,000 acres (2,400 ha), planned on a concentric pattern with open spaces, public parks and six radial boulevards, 120 ft (37 m) wide, extending from the centre. The Garden City would be self-sufficient and when it reached full population, another Garden City would be developed nearby. Howard envisaged a cluster of several Garden Cities as satellites of a central city of 50,000 people, linked by road and rail (Goodall, 1987).

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

Public housing forms a crucial element of Canberra's history. Unlike other cities, where the 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. So much so that it was not until 1972 that the number of privately built dwellings surpassed the number built by government (Wright, 2000: 6). Well before Parliament's first sitting in Canberra in 1927, the Federal Government knew that it would need to provide housing for those relocating to the nation's capital. The Government provided housing in all manner of forms: hostels, hotels, detached residences, and flats.

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 Advisory Committee (1921-24) (FCAC, 2023), was established in recognition that the pace of work had to be lifted significantly if the Seat of Government were to move to the capital (Wright, 2000: 3). The FCAC, constrained by limited funding, built only 126 houses across four residential subdivisions. It had a little more success building hostels with the completion of Hotel Canberra (now the Hyatt Hotel), Hotel Ainslie (now Gorman House), Hotel Kurrajong and Hotel Acton and hostels in Brisbane Avenue and Telopea Park (Wright, 2000: 4).

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. A partly elected ACT Advisory Council was then established to provide residents of the ACT with representation on local matters (ACT Heritage Library).

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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).

There were also concerns about approaches to planning and development of the Capital. To safeguard the Griffin Plan and maintain architectural standards, the NCPDC was established as an advisory body to the Minister of the Interior in 1939 (Archives ACT). This body reviewed and commented on many of the post-war housing development plans, including Griffith Flats (1948), until 1958 when the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) was established.

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. "From 600 in 1945, the official waiting list more than doubled to 1,445 in 1947, then doubled again to more than 2,900 in 1950, edging up to more than 3,000 by 1955" (Wright, 2000: 25). 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).

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. 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. 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) and it in direct response to this need that Griffith Flats was built.

Construction of housing flats in Canberra

The provision of public housing over the period of the construction and development of the National Capital is a significant and distinct example of Australian public housing provision. The Commonwealth Government was the predominant provider of housing in Canberra from the 1920s until 1972 when the NCDC's encouragement of private enterprise construction and the purchase of government houses succeeded in tipping the scales towards private investment in housing (NCDC, 1972: 15).

In the post-war period, government housing provision in Canberra entered a new phase of medium density development in response to the decision to complete the transfer of Government departments from Melbourne to Canberra. At the 41st meeting of the NCPDC in 1944, they made a clear distinction between Commonwealth provision of public housing elsewhere in Australia as part of the post-war reconstruction program, and the provision of housing that would meet both the standards of planning and design in the National Capital and the needs of public servants. It was not until the 1970s that provision of public housing in Canberra became more aligned with the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreements concerning low-income social housing (Hutchison, 2000: 50).

The three initial developments to be constructed by the Commonwealth Department of Works and Housing in response to the housing shortages were the Griffith Flats (1948), the Braddon and Reid flats (1951) and the Ainslie Flats (1952). The design of these flats followed Garden City principles and comprised two-storey concrete construction with brick cladding arranged around the edges of long rectangular blocks, facing the surrounding streets, irrespective of solar orientation, with a shared central area (Graham Brooks and Associates, 2014: 55).

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Flat complex	Site location	Construction	Composition	Amenities	Year completed
Braddon Court	Northern side of Ainslie Ave facing onto Elimatta, Bateman & Gooreen Streets	Eight two-storey buildings	48 two-bedroom flats	Facing a road frontage with the central area between the blocks containing facilities for car parking and clothes drying	1951
Reid Court	Directly opposite Braddon flats facing onto Elimatta, Allambie & Gooreen Streets	Eight two-storey buildings	20 one-bedroom units and 28 two-bedroom units	Facing a road frontage with the central area between the blocks containing facilities for car parking and clothes drying	1952
Ainslie Flats	Bounded by Hayley Street, Chisholm Street, Quick Street and Howe Crescent	Eight two-storey buildings	32 one-bedroom units and 56 two-bedroom units	Facing a road frontage with a central area between the blocks containing facilities for car parking and clothes drying	1952

Table 1 Comparison of 1950s government flats

Physical condition and integrity

The Griffith Flats consist of 48 two-bedroom units on a rectangular site bounded by Canberra Avenue, Eyre Street, Oxley Street and Dawes Street. The units are housed in eight two-storey blocks, each facing a road frontage with the central area between the blocks containing the two original laundry buildings as well as facilities for car parking, leisure and clothes drying.

The buildings are all rectangular in form with shared entrance porches and glassed stairwells offering some articulation. The flats are constructed in face brickwork contributing to the articulation by the introduction of a darker base coursing of Canberra Red brick that extends up to the ground floor window-sill height. This darker colour base, argues Leeson (2012), replicates the concept of a “rusticated base” in classical architecture, and extends up vertically to emphasise the entrance foyers, which punctuate the street facades (Leeson, 2012: 59). The roofs are hipped and tiled with overhanging eaves.

In 2012, Leeson Architects were engaged by ACT Housing to conduct a heritage assessment of 15 places in accordance with the Assessment Criteria set out in the ACT Heritage Act 2004 and the National Heritage Convention (HERCON) Criteria. In their assessment of Griffith Flats their report states: “The Griffith Flats present a series of simple, nicely proportioned and well-mannered, two-storey facades to the surrounding streets, and make a positive contribution to the local streetscape. The two pedestrian laneways that cut across the site from Canberra Avenue to Oxley Street are well integrated into the planning layout, and add to the public amenity of the area and the streetscape qualities of the development” (Leeson, 2012: 49).

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Leeson describes three repeated building forms: mirrored blocks to the short end of the block, with a longer central block flanked by smaller blocks to each of the long sides of the block. These building forms create a consistent edge to the streetscape, punctuated by pedestrian and vehicular entries from the street on the long axis. These features are later repeated in the Ainslie Flats (1952-56).

This site planning creates four landscape spaces: The corners of the development form the largest landscape spaces on the block; the landscaped setback and verge trees provide a consistent treatment of large-scale street trees that dominate the two storey buildings; the central space is a hardscape – with single level low canopied carports; and domestic-scaled spaces around the laundries and to private open spaces within the central space (Leeson, 2012: 66-67).

A site visit was conducted by ACT Heritage staff in June 2023. The buildings appear to be in good overall condition with a high integrity. Some essential but non-permanent elements are evident, such as downpipes, mailboxes, handrails and privacy screening. The carport structure was shown on the original plans, however the current iteration has modern steel roofing.

Internal features are relatively intact, particularly in common areas, where most changes that have been made were completed in order to achieve safety standards, such as hand-rails and fire suppression. Hills Hoists are still present. The laundry buildings have been retained with modern internal fixtures.

The existing landscaping appears to have a high level of consistency from the time of the original planting. Trees have been retained and grassed areas are consistent with original plans and aerial imagery from the 1950s onwards show little change. It is consistent with other plantings of this period and is similar to many other larger residential properties in south Canberra of the late 1940s. The symmetrical planning layout contributes to the landscape character, with a high level of intactness.

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SITE PLAN

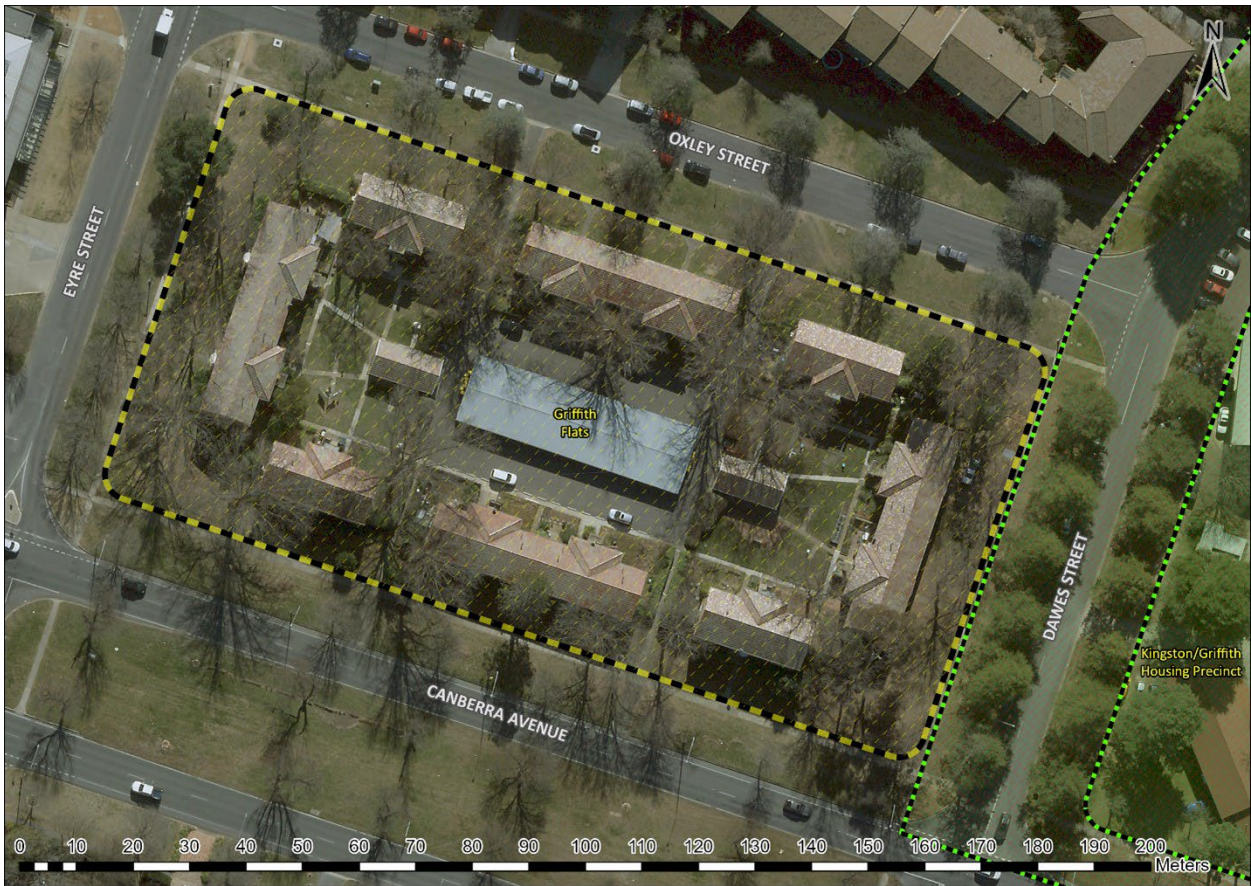


Figure 1 Griffith Flats site boundary

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IMAGES ACT Heritage, Site visit 13/06/23



Figure 2 Signage at the front of the Griffith Flats complex



Figure 3 No.83 Building front entrance

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Figure 4 No.4 Building entrance.



Figure 5 View from the corner of Eyre and Oxley Streets, showing the landscaping, including the hedge and fence that form a corner in the precinct.

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Figure 6 Internal path, drive and landscaping between the buildings.



Figure 7 Internal path system and landscaping including mature trees in the Garden City style

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Figure 8 The rear of the buildings open out to a shared service area including the original laundry building and clothes drying facilities



Figure 9 The rear of buildings provides access to the internal driveway and lawn, some of which has been fenced off with temporary structures

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Figure 10: Original internal staircase, banister and windows with street view



Figure 11: Internal staircase and timber banister

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Figure 12: Renovated kitchen area of an apartment



Figure 13: Original internal doorway and floor on an apartment

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