

Australian Capital Territory

Heritage (Decision about Provisional Registration of Allawah and Bega Courts, Braddon and Reid) Notice 2010

Notifiable Instrument NI2010–525

made under the

***Heritage Act 2004* s34 Notice of decision about Provisional Registration**

1. Name of instrument

This instrument is the Heritage (Decision about Provisional Registration of Allawah and Bega Courts, Braddon and Reid) Notice 2010 -

2. Commencement

This instrument commences on the day after notification.

3. Notice of Decision

Pursuant to Section 32 of the *Heritage Act 2004* the ACT Heritage Council has decided not to provisionally register Allawah and Bega Courts, Braddon and Reid to the ACT Heritage Register.

.....
Mr Gerhard Zatschler
Secretary
ACT Heritage Council
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601

15 September 2010



ACT Heritage Council

STATEMENT OF REASONS

DECISION REGARDING THE INCLUSION OF ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURTS, (Block 1 Section 52 Braddon and Block 1 Section 7 Reid) IN THE ACT HERITAGE REGISTER

Background

A nomination for Allawah and Bega Courts was made in 1999, based on the Australian Institute of Architects' (AIA) citation R106 Allawah and Bega Flats.

As part of a 2009 Concept Master Plan prepared for the area, Peter Freeman Pty Ltd prepared a preliminary Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement. In further response to the Master Plan, Phillip Leeson Architects prepared a second Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement in 2010. These reports have both been used to inform the Heritage Council of the historical context and heritage significance of the buildings.

Members of the Heritage Council visited Allawah and Bega Courts in July 2010 to gain a better understanding of its physical fabric and condition.

At a special Council meeting on 15 September 2010 the ACT Heritage Council endorsed a Statement of Reasons which does not find the Allawah and Bega Courts eligible for provisional listing.

Detailed reasoning of why this place is not eligible for listing under the heritage significance criteria at Section 10 of the *Heritage Act 2004* is included under 'Assessment'.

History

Allawah and Bega Courts (twin developments facing Ballumbir Street in the inner city) and Currong Apartments (immediately behind Allawah) are the result of the mid-1950s attempts by government to house growing numbers of public servants in Canberra.

Allawah (114 two-bedroom flats) was completed in 1956, Bega (also 114 two-bedroom flats) was completed the following year, and the adjacent eight-storey Currong Apartments (184 one-bedroom flats and 28 of two bedrooms) were completed in 1959.

An extensive renovation and upgrading program in the late 1990s brought the inner city flats up to modern standards.

Much of the material in this section is derived from the AIA citation for the Courts, the Peter Freeman Pty Ltd (2009) Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement, and the Phillip Leeson Architects (2010) Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement. Full references are included at the end of this section.

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).

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

Before and after the Allawah and Bega Courts were constructed, a number of medium density flats were built in the Federal Capital. Those completed before Allawah and Bega include the Griffith Flats (1948), the Braddon and Reid flats (1951) and the Ainslie Flats (1952).

Following Allawah and Bega, and in addition to the Northbourne Housing Precinct, were Gowrie Court in Narrabundah (1959), Lachlan Court in Barton (1959), and the Stuart Flats in Griffith (1959).

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

They were all constructed as a result of a desperate shortage of housing in the capital city during the early post-World War II 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.

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 allude 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 the later Allawah and Bega Court proposals.

Other medium density developments built after the Allawah and Bega Courts demonstrate shifts in design intent that were most likely informed by the Department of Works and Housing's experience on the Allawah, Bega and Currong developments.

Gowrie Court in Narrabundah, for instance, consisted of a 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 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.

The planning and development of Allawah and Bega Courts

Because of the high level of scrutiny that the NCPDC applied to all aspects of the Allawah and Bega Court Buildings, together with the Currong Apartments, it is clear that this was considered to be a significant undertaking. This appears to have been due to the larger scale, higher density and prominent location of the residential flat development.

In 1948 urging by National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC) for Canberra to have a full-time town planner resulted in Trevor Gibson, a Sydney graduate who had been working in town planning in Britain, to be appointed in 1949 to head the town planning section of the Department of Works and Housing. The section was transferred in 1950 to the Department of the Interior in Canberra, which then became wholly responsible for developing the city.

Gibson, in an address to a Congress on Regional and Town Planning in 1951 asserted that the population density resulting from the existing plan of Canberra was too low and '*with a restrictive*

height limitation it is conceivable that avenue tree-planting.... will.... dominate almost every form of structural development'. He recommended that the height limitation should be abolished and the skyline be diversified with punctuations - spires or blocks of flats.

Prime Minister Menzies provided further influence towards a move to greater urban consolidation including recognition of the need for high rise buildings if Canberra were to become a true 'city'.

'Menzies was the first Prime Minister to see the desirability of making it possible for Canberra to be developed from a town of less than 10 000 public servants, to the status of a National Capital of world class. Undoubtedly he was much influenced in the mid-1950s by several factors. He was very familiar with the world scene and was conscious of the importance of the new, developing Capitals, particularly Washington - he had faith in Australians to undertake the specialist task; he had a firm grip on his Cabinet and, because of his popularity in the Australian electorate, he had reason to see himself as Prime Minister for many years to come'.

(<http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/bsparcs/aasmemoirs/menzies.htm>, accessed 26/8/2010).

It was at this time and under this philosophy that the Allawah and Bega Courts were developed.

The concept of the design of Allawah and Bega Courts and the adjacent Currong Apartments was the result of Gibson's recommendations to the NCPDC in 1952 that new types and designs for residential development be used, to provide increased density. He referred to zoning in the newer English towns and compared the greater density of the layout for Harlow with that of Canberra.

By early 1953, with the Braddon, Reid and Ainslie Flats completed, the NCPDC began discussing the question of increased residential density in Canberra, and reinvestigated earlier proposals for flats to be located on suitable sites near existing shopping areas. The concept of combining Sections 43 and 52 Braddon, sites that were in close proximity to the Braddon and Reid Flats was proposed, and the Department of Works began to prepare design proposals for this location.

In April 1953 Mr Taylor, Director of Works, and Mr Miller, Principal Architect, Department of Works, presented a sketch proposal for flats on the above site to the Committee. The sketches showed a series of staggered flats that fringed the perimeter of the site. The flat units were similar in area to those at Reid and Ainslie, but the blocks were three storeys high, resulting in a higher overall density.

But committee members expressed reservations about the proposal. They were particularly concerned about the size and impact of the design in that location. They believed that a housing project 'on such a prominent and important site was such that it should receive every possible attention and serious study aimed at producing a building scheme which would not only provide essential accommodation but would also make a definite contribution to the architecture of Canberra'.

Committee members added that this proposal was too important to be rushed through, and that the current design lacked cohesion and was not acceptable. They believed that there was 'unlimited scope for a greatly improved architectural grouping and better land usage, and the provision of an interesting terminating vista feature'. They proposed the idea of holding an architectural competition for the design of flats on the site, recommending to the Minister of the Department of the Interior the 'desirability of holding an architectural competition for the layout of the site and design of the essential buildings', as 'there were many architects in Australia with extensive experience in the particular field of flat design'. But they went further, recommending that the

competition 'should be open to all architects registered in the Commonwealth'. Amongst the guidelines suggested by the Committee were stipulations that habitable areas should be limited to three storeys in height, and that the flats were to be 'economical living units – not luxury flats'.

Taylor explained that shortages of staff within his Department had led to a situation where it had not been possible to give the design the serious consideration that it deserved. He could see no problem with the idea of a competition, and would discuss that option further. He would also see if an alternative sketch plan could be prepared.

To facilitate a major residential development on this site, steps were taken to close Batman Street between Cooyong and Currong Streets, and to reduce Moran Street to a pedestrian way.

But by June 1953 it was apparent that an architectural competition for the design of flats on the site was unlikely to proceed, and the Department of Works was rushing to prepare a revised design. John Overall, Chief Government Architect in the Department, had taken control of the project, and confidently declared that his organisation possessed the architectural resources required to develop design proposals for the site in a relatively short timeframe.

At the July 1953 meeting of the NCPDC Overall, design architect Richard Ure and Mr Miller made a very comprehensive presentation of what were then known as the 'Braddon flats'. Taking turns, they presented three alternative sketch proposals that had been prepared by departmental architects in Sydney in collaboration with the Canberra office. The sketch designs, submitted in bound form, contained site locality and contour plans, a general layout plan, elevations, an aerial perspective, a variety of layout plans, and external and internal perspectives. The drawings were supplemented by supplementary data such as site analyses, accommodation schedules and a 'Direct Insolation Analysis', which claimed to indicate the hours of direct sunlight that would be obtained by habitable rooms at different times of the year.

It was an impressive presentation, particularly given the short amount of time available to prepare the designs and documentation. The Department had considered the required site density, and had concluded that the required high level could not be achieved through the construction of three-storey blocks (with stair access to all flats), and multi-storey units up to eight storeys in height (with lift access). The accommodation proposed for the higher blocks was intended to be bed-sitting room types, designed principally for single occupants who were currently living in hostels.

During the presentation Overall declared his preference for Scheme B, which placed the three storey blocks along Cooyong Street, with the eight-storey blocks set back from Currong Street. He felt that this scheme would be 'an attractive addition to the architecture of Canberra'. Overall and his colleagues promoted the benefits of developing Section 7 Reid – just across Ainslie Avenue – with similar residential flats at a later stage to create a 'balanced development'.

After some discussion, the Committee agreed with Overall that scheme B was the most satisfactory solution, and resolved that this proposal be adopted as the basis for further design development.

In spite of their earlier preference for an architectural competition for the design of the housing precinct – and the idea that international architects should be invited – some members of the committee began to exhibit conservative views when it came to details of the Department's design proposal. For instance, they expressed a preference for less glass throughout the development.

The proposal that was presented to the committee in July 1953 was a large, ambitious undertaking in terms of the amount of residential accommodation that it would provide. The development was staged over a period of three years.

In 1954 the working drawings were signed by Richard Ure in the Department of Works Canberra office as Principal Architect, and Bruce Litchfield as Supervising Architect. Ian Slater was responsible for documenting the working drawings. Richard Ure had won the competition for the design of the Australian-American Memorial in 1950. Ian Slater was later Project Architect for the Canberra Olympic Pool that won the 1956 Sulman Award.

In 1953 the Canberra Times heralded the major construction project as:

200 FLATS IN VAST PROJECT AT BRADDON – The largest flat project yet proposed in Canberra is being considered by the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, Mr A T Shakespeare reported to the Advisory Council yesterday. “The scheme envisages 200 or more flats to be built in sections 43 and 52, Braddon. The Planning Committee has already recommended to the Minister that Batman Street should be closed between Coorong and Ballumbir Streets, so that an area 700 yards by 400 yards may be available for the project... A corrective to the present position, and a better return on services, could be achieved by filling in the vacant areas in Canberra and employing every means to increase the density of the population. The flat project near Gorman House was the largest single housing project ever developed in one locality in the history of Canberra. (Freeman, 2009).

There was some political criticism of the proposal, linked to the capacity of Canberra’s infrastructure to cope with the new development, and to the problem of ad-hoc planning of the Federal capital.

In September 1954 the Canberra Times reported:

MR FRASER CRITICISES BRADDON FLATS PLAN: ... Appealing to the Government not to interfere with the plan for Canberra to meet present day requirements, he said development of the city should be progressive. It should not be done in fits and starts and on sudden decisions and reversals of decisions’ (Freeman, 2009).

Allawah Court was completed in 1956. In 1957 a similar series of three-storey flats, containing 114 two-bedroom flats, was completed on the Reid site in lieu of the high-rise proposal that had been presented to the NCPDC in July 1953. These became known as Bega Court. Currong Apartments were completed in 1959.

The accommodation provided by the Allawah, Bega and Currong developments combined came to a total of 184 one-bedroom flats and 256 two-bedroom flats. The largest post World War II housing projects in Canberra before that were the 1951 Braddon and Reid Flats, on opposite sides of Ainslie Avenue. These contained a combined total of 20 one-bedroom flats and 76 two-bedroom flats. The Ainslie Flats of the following year contained 32 one-bedroom flats and 56 two-bedroom flats.

References

RAIA citation for the RAIA Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture, including the following references:

- Gibbney, Jim 1988 *Canberra 1913-1953*, AGPS.
- National Archives of Australia, Aperture Cards of Department of Works Drawings, Early Canberra, Braddon Flats, Microfilm Nos 22382 & 23371 et al.
- National Library of Australia Manuscript Collection, Papers of Jim Gibbney MS 1313, Box 30, Planning.
- RAIA 1982 *Canberra An Architectural Guide to Australia's Capital*, page 9.
- Sparke, Eric 1988 *Canberra 1954-1980*, AGPS.
- Wright, Bruce 2000 *Cornerstone of the Capital – A History of Public Housing in Canberra*, ACT Housing, Canberra.

Phillip Leeson Architects, 2010, 'Allawah and Bega Courts: Sections 52 and 57 Braddon – Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement', report prepared for Purdon Associates.

Peter Freeman Pty Ltd, 2009, 'Bega and Allawah Court, Sections 52 and 57 Braddon, Preliminary Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement', Final Report prepared for CHM Architects.

Physical Description

The need to find an appropriate architecture for this large commission, and important location, was a challenge for the Department of Works architects. It was a challenge that provided the design team, headed by Ure, with an opportunity to shift away from architectural styles that the Department had previously employed on housing projects, and to experiment with elements and concepts of International Style design and constructional techniques.

The way in which the 16 separate building blocks that constitute Allawah and Bega Courts were placed on their sites reveals a conceptual shift towards modernist site planning techniques.

Earlier Department of Works flat developments in Canberra were based upon a symmetrical, formal planning formula whereby the blocks were always placed around the perimeter of the site, facing the streets, to create one large internal space.

While the initial design proposal for Allawah Court comprised three L-shaped blocks and three rectangular blocks, the L-shaped blocks were separated in the design development stage. This resulted in a site layout that reveals an alternative approach to composing urban space, where the blocks are separated from each other, and do not align.

This creates a more open and informal site pattern, or 'figure-ground' composition. The end result is a freer site plan, and a series of semi-enclosed courtyard spaces whose open corners imply diagonal movement across the space.

In spite of the best intentions, and the importance that the Committee and Department attached to this housing scheme, the architectural quality of these buildings was limited by a number of factors throughout the design process.

These factors include the initial decision that the flats would be designed within the Department of Works rather than opened up to an architectural competition, the pressure under which the Department, with limited resources, was required to plan its project, and the imposition of strict budget restrictions. In some instances, the conservative nature of the Committee itself appeared to be a limiting factor, including through their decision to reduce the amount of glazed surfaces.

Allawah and Bega Courts each consist of eight three-storey blocks of two-bedroom flats. They present 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 courtyards between.

The Post-War International style of design is similar to post-war housing in Europe, particularly in English new towns. The fine proportions, crisp detailing and low scale of these three-storey blocks and their siting continuing the street pattern made them more architecturally successful than the three eight-storey blocks of flats along Currong Street which completed the development.

Each flat has a passage opening into a living room with a balcony, a kitchen, two bedrooms with built-in wardrobes, and a bathroom. Construction of the blocks is of face brick end walls; incised-patterned rendered-brick front and back walls; concrete floors and balconies and flat steel deck roofs without parapets. Each stairwell has a fully glazed wall and each flat has a full-height glazed frame the width of its living room and balcony. Wrought-iron balustrades outside entrances and on stair landings and balconies have a zigzag pattern. Adjoining balconies have thin concrete dividing and side walls and hoods.

The flats have been well maintained. Adjustable metal louvres have been added to all balconies along Ballumbir Street for sun control. Wooden lean-to pergolas and enclosed small courtyards with brick walls and timber fence panels have been added to all ground-level flats. All glazed timber frames, external doors and windows have been replaced by anodised aluminium. Some of the front and back rendered walls were originally mustard-coloured and others were grey-blue, but all are now pale green. The now-mature trees in and around the courts add to the aesthetic quality of the complex. Many of the mature evergreen and deciduous trees would have been planted at the time the site was developed.

Within the complex there are a number of internal courtyards, parking areas and internal footpaths.

The key characteristics of the Post-War International Style (c.1940-1960) identified by Apperly, Irving and Reynolds (1994) are cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, curtain wall, large sheets of glass, overhang for shade, plain smooth wall surface, external sun-control device, corbusian window motif, cantilever, contrasting non-rectangular shape, and contrasting texture.

Of these eleven characteristics, the Allawah and Bega Courts demonstrate five: a cubiform overall shape, overhang for shade, plain, smooth wall surfaces, cantilevered balconies, and contrasting texture between brick and rendered facades.

Apperly, Irving and Reynolds (1994) describe the broad characteristics of this style as ‘sleek, glossy, prismatic forms with uninterrupted surfaces. Selective expression of structural system often featured. Barrier between exterior and interior minimised by extensive glazing’ (Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, 1994: 217). Settings and relationships of this style are described as ‘removal of old height limitations facilitated large scale and vertical monumentality’ (Apperly, Irving and Reynolds, 1994: 217).

Some of the principal ways in which the Allawah and Bega Courts display visual connections to International Style design – the pure, prismatic nature of the cubistic, rectangular building blocks – have been lost through the addition of many other later building elements.

A series of brick walls and pillars, steel fences and gates, pergolas, metal louvers etc have been added to the buildings and courtyards during the intervening decades, compromising the design integrity of the original concept.

Assessment

The Council's assessment against the criteria specified in s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004* is as follows.

In assessing the nomination for Allawah and Bega Courts, Reid and Braddon, the Council considered:

- The material identified under the heading 'References', above; and
- The physical evidence and surrounding context as ascertained from an onsite visit in July 2010.

The Council's assessment against the criteria specified in s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004* is as follows.

Criterion (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 nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

Allawah and Bega Courts demonstrate some aspects of the Post-War International style of design. They demonstrate a shift towards modernist site planning techniques through the placement on their sites, with the blocks separated from each other.

While the Allawah and Bega Courts introduced elements of the Post-War International style to public housing, they do not demonstrate the style or its application to a high degree of technical or creative achievement, and hence do not meet this criterion.

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

The nominator claims that the place meets this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

Like most building projects, the designs of these flats were modified throughout the developed design and documentation phases, and the finished buildings were significantly different to those depicted in the preliminary sketch plans. But at no stage of their design development – from sketch design through to documentation and construction – is it considered that the Allawah and Bega courts exhibited what could be termed 'outstanding design or aesthetic qualities'.

In spite of the best intentions, and the importance that the Committee and Department attached to this housing scheme, the architectural quality of these buildings was limited by a number of factors throughout the process. These factors include the pressure under which the Department, with

limited resources, was required to plan its project in response to limited budgets and short timeframes, and the conservative approach of committee members.

The siting of the flats, creating informal internal courtyards provides some aesthetic qualities with mature trees thought to be contemporary with the buildings' development.

There is currently no evidence to support the view that the community or cultural group values the place for design or aesthetic qualities. Allawah and Bega Courts do not meet this criterion.

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 practiced, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest*

The nominator claims the place meets this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

Allawah and Bega Courts contribute to an understanding of the provision of public housing in Canberra – an important historical theme within the context of the ACT. This distinctive way of life and land use is no longer practiced to the same degree and for the same reasons as it was at the time that the Allawah and Bega Courts were constructed.

The Allawah and Bega Courts were constructed as medium density housing flats, designed as one and two bedroom flats, and were completed in 1956 and 1957.

There are many examples throughout Canberra of the government's response to the need to provide housing for Canberra residents, from the earliest programs in the 1920s through to those post-World War II and beyond. These examples include private residences, hotels and blocks of flats.

Allawah and Bega Courts represent the first major housing project in Canberra since the late 1920s, and they are located in a prominent central location.

Allawah and Bega Courts demonstrate a particular design and function associated with the provision of public housing in the ACT post World War II. This design and function reflects the government's response to the critical shortage of housing in the Capital Territory after World War II.

The planning design and philosophy which underpinned the site planning and footprint for the Allawah and Bega Court Buildings provides evidence of a distinctive design, and is the first public housing place in Canberra to demonstrate this design. The design allows for healthy buildings with accessible open spaces. This value, however, can only be appreciated in relation to the design of comparable public housing that preceded and followed their design. While there is the possibility that the Allawah and Bega Courts or a sample of their design principles might, following the current public housing study, need to be assessed as part of the series nomination, at the present time they do not meet this criterion in their own right.

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 nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

No information has been provided to suggest that the Allawah and Bega Courts are highly valued by the community or a cultural group.

Allawah and Bega Courts do not meet this criterion.

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

The nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

This criterion is not applicable.

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

The nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

The Allawah and Bega Courts are but one example of post World War II medium density housing flats within the ACT. Other flats which remain from this period are the Griffith Flats (1948), the Braddon and Reid Flats (1951), the Ainslie Flats (1952), Gowrie Court (1959) and the Stuart Flats (1959). As such, Allawah and Bega Courts are not a rare or unique example of this kind of place.

Allawah and Bega Courts are an example of the Post-War International style of design within the Canberra context. Given the scale and extent of this development, they are the principal remnant examples of medium density housing, demonstrating influences of International Style architecture that were built in the Federal Capital during the 1950s.

However, the extent to which Allawah and Bega Flats demonstrate the main characteristics of this architectural style is limited (*see criterion g*). As such, they cannot be considered as a rare or unique example of this style of architecture in the context of public housing.

The Allawah and Bega Courts do not meet this criterion.

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

The nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

In spite of the best intentions, and the importance that the NCPDC attached to this housing scheme, the architectural quality of these buildings was limited by a number of factors throughout the process. These factors include the pressure under which the Department, with limited resources, was required to plan its project in response to limited budgets and short timeframes, and the conservative approach of committee members.

They were conceived upon the conceptual foundations of previous flats designed by the Department of Works. Building upon that, they contain ideas and formal devices that reflect some aspects of International Style thinking. These International Style references, however, are limited. They are

also incremental and workmanlike, representing a gradual shift away from previous methodologies rather than the adoption of radical modernist design ideals.

The glass panes of Allawah and Bega Courts are not considered extensive or to be ‘large sheets of glass’ in the context of this style of design. Rather, they form a more subtle element within the broader expanse of the exterior façade of the buildings. The dominant exterior material is not glazing, but face brick or a rendered surface. The glass panes are not overwhelming or predominant features of the Courts.

Apperly, Irving and Reynolds (1994: 214) state that modern architecture through the 1950s in Australia was predominantly illustrated by ‘the curtain walled office block and the radical, flat-roofed, glass-walled private house... What were at that time radically modern buildings were distinguished by their extensive use of steel, reinforced concrete and glass, by their predilection for open-planning, and by the gradual realisation on the part of the designers of the need for sun control if large areas of glass were to be used’. Clearly, glass was a fundamental component of this design style.

While it was originally intended that Allawah and Bega Courts contain large glass panels, in-keeping with the ideals of the Post-War International style of architecture of the time, the costs associated with glazing, and the perceived conservatism of the NCPDC saw the plans alter considerably away from some of the fundamental components of this style. Further, the buildings were scaled down in height from the original concept plans, again moving away from some of the broad characteristics of Post-War International style.

Another ‘kind of place’ might be post-war public housing. While the Allawah and Bega Courts do not in themselves represent the main characteristics of this larger kind of place, there remains the possibility that they may reflect those characteristic in combination with a series of other places in a multi-place nomination. A study on Canberra’s large-scale public housing developments has not yet been completed, so this possibility cannot be determined at this time. While there is the possibility that the Allawah and Bega Courts or a sample of their design principles might, following the current public housing study, need to be assessed as part of the series nomination, at the present time they do not meet this criterion in their own right.

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

The nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

Allawah and Bega Courts have an association with the planners and architects involved in the design and development of the building, including Richard Ure, Bruce Litchfield, Ian Slater and John Overall.

Overall later went on to become Commissioner of the NCDC. Richard Ure had won the competition for the design of the Australian-American Memorial in 1950. Ian Slater was later Project Architect for the Canberra Olympic Pool that won the 1956 Sulman Award.

Given the nature of the occupations of these people, their association with the design and development of Allawah and Bega Courts is not considered to be out of the ordinary, or strong or special in any way, beyond any other similar association they may have with other construction and development projects with which they were involved.

Allawah and Bega Courts are the major achievement for the NCPDC, having an association with this group.

Allawah and Bega Courts contribute to an understanding of the provision of public housing in Canberra – an important cultural phase within the context of the ACT.

The Allawah and Bega Courts were constructed as medium density housing flats, designed as one and two bedroom flats, and were completed in 1956 and 1957.

There are many examples throughout Canberra of the government's response to the need to provide housing for Canberra residents, from the earliest programs in the 1920s through to those post-World War II and beyond. These examples include private residences, hotels and blocks of flats.

Allawah and Bega Courts are variations of a broad theme. They represent the largest post World War II housing development in Canberra, and they are located in a prominent central location. They demonstrate a shift in site planning and design philosophy, influenced by Prime Minister Menzies and Canberra's first town planner, Trevor Gibson.

This value, however, can only be appreciated in relation to the design of comparable public housing that preceded and followed their design. While there is the possibility that the Allawah and Bega Courts or a sample of their design principles might, following the current public housing study, need to be assessed as part of the series nomination, at the present time they do not meet this criterion in their own right.

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

The nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

This criterion is not applicable.

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 nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

Allawah and Bega Courts are not considered likely to provide information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the cultural history of the ACT.

Allawah and Bega Courts do not meet this criterion.

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

The nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

This criterion is not applicable.

Criterion (I) 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 nominator made no claim against this criterion.

Heritage Council assessment:

This criterion is not applicable.

Conclusion

Allawah and Bega Courts demonstrate part of the history of the government's provision of public housing in Canberra and, in particular, post World War II medium density housing flats. They demonstrate only minor characteristics of the Post-War International style of architecture.

Allawah and Bega Courts may have some heritage value in relation to their site planning and development philosophy, and a shift towards a more modern approach to town planning in Canberra in the early 1950s. There is currently insufficient information to accurately assess these values. It is expected that the current heritage assessment being commissioned by the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services will provide sufficient further information to assess these values.

Council considers that any values which do arise in relation to these aspects could be encapsulated through an example which demonstrates the full courtyard and open space planning of Bega Court.

Gerhard Zatschler (Secretary)
ACT Heritage Council

15 September 2010