

Heritage (Decision about Provisional Registration of the Northbourne Flats, Braddon and Turner) Notice 2014

Notifiable Instrument NI2014–224

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 the Northbourne Flats, Braddon and Turner) Notice 2014*.

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 the Northbourne Flats, Braddon and Turner to the ACT Heritage Register.

Anna Gurnhill
A/g Secretary (as delegate for)
ACT Heritage Council
22 May 2014



ACT Heritage Council

STATEMENT OF REASONS

DECISION NOT TO PROVISIONALLY REGISTER NORTHBOURNE FLATS (Block 2 Section 8 BRADDON & Block 1 Section 57 TURNER) IN THE ACT HERITAGE REGISTER

This Statement of Reasons provides an assessment of the Northbourne Flats and finds that they do not meet any of the criteria of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

Background

The Northbourne Flats (the Flats) were nominated to the ACT Heritage Register by a member of the ACT community for its architectural and planning merits and associations with original tenants, in particular Government officials.

The Flats are included on the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (RSTCA), Item Number R088.

The Flats are included in the 2011 draft report by Philip Leeson Architects Pty Ltd titled *Heritage Assessments of Housing ACT Properties*. The report considers that the Flats do not meet the threshold for registration under the *Heritage Act 2004*.

The Flats were designed by the Commonwealth Department of Works in association with the Sydney based architectural firm Budden, Nagle and Michael in 1956. Construction was completed in 1959 by Civil and Civic Pty Ltd. The buildings incorporate some attributes of Post-War International Style (1940-60) including cubiform overall shape and plain, smooth wall surfaces.

The Flats are medium density public housing constructed post-war to accommodate the influx of public servants to the capital in the 1950s. The Flats continue to be used as public housing.

The Flats were externally inspected by the ACT Heritage Unit on 23 April 2014.

The Council discussed the nomination of the Flats at its meeting on 22 May 2014.

Assessment

In assessing the nomination for the Northbourne Flats, the Council considered:

- the original nomination and documentary evidence supplied by the nominator;
- information provided by a site inspection in April 2014 by the ACT Heritage Unit; and
- the report by the ACT Heritage Unit titled, *Background Information The Northbourne Flats*, May 2014, containing photographs and information on history, description, condition and integrity.

Pursuant to s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, a place or object has heritage significance if it satisfies one or more of the following criteria. The following assessment by the Council has been informed by research including that found in the references noted in the document *Background Information - The Northbourne Flats*, May 2014. Future research may alter the findings of this assessment.

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 Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

The Council acknowledges that the Flats demonstrate some aspects of Post-War International Style (1940-1960).

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

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

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

- Absence of Corbusian window motif;
- Absence of cantilever elements;
- Absence of contrasting non-rectangular shapes;
- Absence of sun-control devices;
- Absence of large sheets of glass (the glass walls in the stairwells are conventional 1950s design using small panes of glass in an aluminium frame);
- Absence of flat roofing, diminishing the quality of the Cubiform shape;
- Absence of a true plain wall surface;
- Absence of a true curtain wall (the glass walls in the stairwells is conventional 1950s design using small panes of glass in an aluminium frame);
- Minimal expose of structural frames, restricted only to parking under crofts and certain elevations; and the
- Token nature of overhangs.

The Flats are an example of medium density public housing in a landscape setting exhibiting some features of the Post-War International Style. The integrity of the style has been diminished through the absence of a significant number of key features.

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

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

The Flats are not considered to demonstrate a high enough degree of technical or creative achievement, or an exceptionally fine level of application of existing techniques and approaches, so as to meet the threshold of this criterion.

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

The Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

While the Flats demonstrate some aspects of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) as outlined under Criterion (a) the integrity of the style however has been diminished through the absence of a significant number of key features and accordingly the Flats are not considered to exhibit outstanding design or aesthetic qualities in relation to this style.

The Council acknowledges that the Flats are valued by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) for its architectural merits as demonstrated through its listing on the RSTCA. However the Council's *Heritage Assessment Policy* interprets a cultural group as a 'group of people within a society with a shared ethnic or cultural background' or 'a group of people connected through the same way of living, which has been transmitted from one generation to another'. The Council therefore does not consider AIA to be a cultural group for the purposes of the criterion.

In addition, there is insufficient evidence before the Council to demonstrate that the Flats exhibit other outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the ACT community or a cultural group.

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 Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

The Council acknowledges that the Flats are evidence of post-war medium density public housing which provided accommodation for the influx of public servants to the capital in the 1950s. Public housing has a strong representation in Canberra's history because unlike many other cities, in Canberra a large program of public housing established from 1927 provided housing for all classes of society. The Flats no longer demonstrate the provision of housing to relocated public servants but now provide housing for others.

Furthermore, the extensive program of providing public housing in Canberra was established before the Flats were constructed and housing continues to be provided to the ACT Community. The Flats therefore are not considered to be important as evidence of a distinctive way of life or function that is no longer practiced, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest.

While the Flats demonstrate some aspects of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) and express principles of Modern garden design as outlined under Criterion (a) the integrity of the style has been diminished through the absence of a significant number of key features or is not uncommon and therefore cannot be considered as important evidence of a distinctive design that is no longer practiced, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest.

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 Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

The Council acknowledges that the Flats currently provide public housing for some members of the ACT community, and therefore may be valued by its current tenants as a place which represents home. The Council also acknowledges that the AIA places value on the Flats for their ability to demonstrate influences of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) as demonstrated through its listing on the RSTCA.

The Council's *Heritage Assessment Policy*, interprets a cultural group as a 'group of people within a society with a shared ethnic or cultural background' or 'a group of people connected through the same way of living, which has been transmitted from one generation to another'. The Council therefore do not consider the Flats current tenants or the AIA to be a cultural group for the purposes of the criterion.

Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence before the Council to demonstrate that the Flats are highly valued by the broader ACT community for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, education or social associations.

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

This criterion does not apply to the Northbourne Flats.

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

The Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

Together with the earlier Allawah and Bega Courts and the later Northbourne Housing Precinct, the Flats are an example of medium-density public housing, demonstrating influences of Post-War International Style (1940-60). As part of a group of three, the Northbourne Flats cannot be considered rare or unique. Furthermore they lack critical elements of the style as outlined in Criterion (a) which diminishes its capacity to be rare or unique in its comparative intactness.

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

The Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

There are a number of examples of places demonstrating medium-density public housing constructed to house the influx public servants in Canberra. The Flats do not demonstrate the characteristics of such places to a greater degree than the others. While the Flats demonstrate some aspects of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) as outlined under Criterion (a) the integrity of the style has been diminished through the absence of a significant number of key features and

therefore the Flats cannot be considered a notable example of the style demonstrating its main characteristics.

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

The Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

The Flats have associations with a cultural and development phase in Canberra when medium-density public housing flats were constructed to house the post-war influx of public servants in the 1950s. The Flats represented the first stage of the expansion of the Capital to the north of the commercial centre. Their construction was quickly followed by the Northbourne Housing Precinct, completed less than three years later in 1962. Furthermore, the provision of public housing in Canberra for public servants was already well established, and as demonstrated in the Northbourne Housing Precinct, the process continued after the construction of the Flats. Therefore, the Flats' association with this cultural or development phase is not considered strong or special when compared with the associations of other public housing developments of the same period.

In addition, the building appears to be associated with a phase in Canberra's planning when the NCPDC and NCDC were establishing new policies for the development of Northbourne Avenue. However, there is currently insufficient contextual information about this phase, and how the design of the Flats is evidence of the planning policies, to enable an assessment of this association.

The architects Budden, Nagle and Michael are not considered as leading practitioners of the Post-War International Style (1940-60), being better known during the inter war period for 'modern' buildings with historical references. There is insufficient evidence to suggest that the architect has a strong or special association with the place.

There is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the Flats have a strong or special association with a person in local or national history. Whilst the original nomination states that the '*original tenants for whom these flats were built were among some of the most prominent Canberra citizens of the day – Government Ministers, Politicians, High Ranking public servants, i.e. a Commissioner for Taxation, a member of the Judiciary, many High Ranking defence personnel, employees of Foreign Affairs, and Diplomats, staff of Foreign Embassies, University Lecturers and visiting Medical Officers*' no information was provided as to the identity of any of those residents or how their relationship may be strong or special to the place. There is insufficient evidence that any of the Flats' original, past or current tenants have a strong or special association with the place above any other place they have occupied.

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

This criterion does not apply to the Northbourne Flats.

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 Northbourne Flats do not meet this criterion.

There is insufficient evidence before the Council that the Northbourne Flats have provided, or are likely to provide, information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the cultural history of the ACT because of their use or potential use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site.

While the Flats exhibit influences of the Post-War International Style (1940-60) as outlined in Criterion (a) they do lack some critical characteristics of the style diminishing the places ability to be used as a research or teaching site or considered a benchmark site. What ability the place does have to provide information to the ACT community regarding the style is adequately represented by documentary evidence and the physical material of the buildings is unlikely to contribute further to a wider understanding of the cultural history of the ACT.

The Flats are an example of medium-density public housing constructed to house the post-war influx of public servants in the 1950s. Many other comparable examples exist such as the Griffith Flats, Braddon and Reid Flats, Ainslie Flats, Allawah and Bega Courts, Stuart Flats, Northbourne Housing Precinct, Kanangra Court and Jerilderie Court. Moreover, there is adequate documentary evidence of the Flats' design, construction and history. The physical material of the buildings is unlikely to contribute further to a wider understanding of the cultural history of the ACT.

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

This criterion does not apply to the Northbourne Flats.

The garden courts contain a number of healthy mature trees but they are not rare in Canberra.

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

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

This criterion does not apply to the Northbourne Flats.

Conclusion

The Northbourne Flats are evidence of post-war medium density public housing, exhibiting features of the Post-War International Style (1940-1960), constructed to provide accommodation for the influx of public servants to the capital in the 1950s.

Other existing examples of post-war public housing include Griffith Flats, Braddon and Reid Courts, Ainslie Flats, Gowrie Court, Stuart Flats, Kanangra Court and Jerilderie Court. Furthermore, other examples of post-war public housing demonstrating influences of Post-War International Style include Allawah and Bega Courts and the Northbourne Housing Precinct.

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

As the Flats lack some critical characteristics of the style their ability to be used for research or teaching, or to be considered as a benchmark is diminished. What ability the place does have to provide information to the ACT community regarding the style is adequately represented by documentary evidence and the physical material of the building is unlikely to contribute further to a wider understanding of the cultural history of the ACT.

The Council has insufficient evidence before it to determine that the ACT community or a cultural group highly value the Flats for reasons of strong or special educational or social associations or for its aesthetic or design qualities.

The Council therefore does not consider that the Flats have heritage significance that is strong or special enough to be considered above the ordinary and as such they are not included in the ACT Heritage Register.

This Statement of Reasons provides an assessment of the Northbourne Flats and finds that the place does not meet any of the criteria of the *Heritage Act 2004*.