

Heritage (Decision about Provisional Registration of Open Systems House (formerly Churchill House) Braddon) Notice 2018

Notifiable Instrument NI2018–175

made under the

Heritage Act 2004, s32 (Decision about provisional registration) and s34 (Notice of decision about provisional registration)

1 Name of instrument

This instrument is the *Heritage (Decision about Provisional Registration of Open Systems House (formerly Churchill House) Braddon) Notice 2018*.

2 Decision about provisional registration

On 5 April 2018, the ACT Heritage Council (the **Heritage Council**) decided not to provisionally register Open Systems House (formerly Churchill House), Block 10, Section 7, Braddon (the **Place**).

3 Description of the Place

The description of the Place is in the schedule.

4 Reasons for the decision

The Heritage Council is not satisfied on reasonable grounds that the Place is likely to have heritage significance as defined by section 10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*. A detailed statement of reasons, including an assessment against the heritage significance criteria, is provided in the schedule.

5 Date decision takes effect

The decision not to provisionally register the Place takes effect on 6 April 2018 (being the day after the Heritage Council made its decision in writing as set out in the schedule).

Jennifer O’Connell
Secretary (as delegate for)
ACT Heritage Council
5 April 2018



ACT Heritage Council

STATEMENT OF REASONS
DECISION NOT TO PROVISIONALLY REGISTER
Open Systems House (former Churchill House)
(Block 10 Section 7, Braddon)
IN THE ACT HERITAGE REGISTER

In accordance with Section 32 of the *Heritage Act 2004*, the ACT Heritage Council has decided not to provisionally register Open Systems House (former Churchill House), Braddon. This Statement of Reasons provides an assessment of Open Systems House (former Churchill House), Braddon and finds that the place does not meet any of the criteria under s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

In determining heritage significance, the Council must first determine whether a place or object has value in relation to a criterion (applying a basic test), and then apply threshold indicators, to 'test' the degree to which the place or object is significant and hence whether it meets a criterion and warrants registration. Throughout the assessment detailed below, the Council applied threshold indicators, and found that the various attributes of heritage significance considered have not passed the thresholds for any of the significance criteria. The Council have also considered all of these attributes as a collective feature and have found that the place still does not meet the threshold for any of the significance criteria.

While Churchill House is of great interest to proponents and scholars of Robin Boyd's work, it does not contribute strongly enough to the cultural history of the ACT to meet any of the criteria. While it may be a striking building with innovative design elements, it is the opinion of the Council that, on balance, Churchill House does not demonstrate heritage values at levels sufficient for it to pass the tests or thresholds of heritage significance criteria as set out in s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

This statement refers to the location of the place as required in s.34(5)(b)(ii) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

LOCATION OF THE PLACE

Open Systems House (former Churchill House), 218 Northbourne Avenue, Block 10 Section 7, Braddon.

This section refers to the description of the place as required in s.34(5)(b)(iii) of the *Heritage Act 2004*. The boundary of the place and extent of features listed below is illustrated at Image 1.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE

Open Systems House (former Churchill House), consisting of all built and landscaped features within Block 10 Section 7, Braddon.

This statement refers to the Council's reasons for its decision as required in s.34(5)(b)(iv) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

REASONS FOR DECISION

The Council is not satisfied on reasonable grounds that the place is likely to have heritage significance as defined by s.10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

This statement refers to the Council's assessment of the place against the heritage significance criteria as a part of its reasons for its decision as required in s.34(5)(b)(iv) of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

ASSESSMENT AGAINST THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

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

In assessing the heritage significance of Open Systems House (former Churchill House), Braddon, the Council considered:

- the original nomination and documentary evidence supplied by the nominator;
- the Council's *Heritage Assessment Policy* (February 2015);
- information provided by a site inspection limited to what can be viewed from the public realm on 12 November 2013 by ACT Heritage; and
- the report by ACT Heritage titled, *Background Information Open Systems House (former Churchill House)*, September 2017, 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. Future research may alter the findings of this assessment.

(a) importance to the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural or natural history;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (a) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

As detailed in the background document, the building was the national headquarters of the Trust for over two decades, from where it administered the fellowship program which allowed Australians to travel overseas for research and training. While the Trust and its activities may be of interest, the building itself is not important as evidence of this activity; it is simply a place where the activity was administered and displayed and was an investment at the time for the Trust. Additionally, the building's most unique feature that could have been considered as evidence of this, the glass gallery, was demolished in 1980.

Churchill House holds an important place in the career of Robin Boyd, being his last commission and one of few larger commercial buildings he designed, but outside of this connection the building itself is not exceptional in representing Brutalist or modern architecture, even as advocated or adopted by Boyd. The use of Brutalist designs for buildings has fallen out of mainstream fashion, but the buildings themselves have endured. This style of building had a brief, but lasting, effect on the architecture of the ACT during the rapid development of the city under the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC). Significant examples of these buildings in the ACT are listed in the background document. Churchill House, while one of the earliest examples of the style in the ACT, has not been demonstrated to have been exceptional in the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural history, particularly when compared to these other examples.

The NCDC created design and siting policies for both sides of this section of Northbourne Avenue in the late 1960s. This was associated with a brief period when the NCDC also undertook extensive upgrading of Northbourne Avenue enhancing its importance as a ceremonial avenue and major entry to the city. Churchill House was the first non-government building to be erected in accordance with that policy. While the siting and scale of the building may be a result of this policy, the significance of that policy was that it developed a consistent approach to the planning of Northbourne Avenue overall. One small section of that scheme cannot be representative of that policy in isolation. The NCDC's policy for Northbourne Avenue as a precinct has been compromised by the layering of later development and the impact of more recent design principles.

(b) has uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural or natural history;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (b) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

The building represents the purpose-built national headquarters of an Australian organisation, however, as the national capital, the ACT has numerous examples of this aspect of the ACT's cultural history and so it is not considered to be uncommon, rare or endangered.

As noted in criterion (a), Churchill House is one of several Brutalist style buildings in the ACT; other examples are listed in the background document. It is therefore not considered to be an uncommon, rare or endangered example of Brutalist architecture in the ACT.

Additionally, although it is an example of the physical manifestation of NDCD planning policies relating to development along Northbourne Avenue at the time; these policies are not considered uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural history. They are a part of the development of planning principles applied to the ACT over time and are better represented in NDCD records as well as forming the basis for current planning policies which have developed from them.

(c) potential to yield important information that will contribute to an understanding of the ACT's cultural or natural history;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (c) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

Churchill House is not considered to have the potential to yield information that will contribute significantly to an understanding of the cultural history of the ACT. Whilst Churchill House has been used by the University of Canberra to teach architectural design principles to students, it has not been shown to make a contribution beyond this, to the understanding of the cultural history of the broader ACT, nor has it been shown to yield important information that is not already known through design drawings, government records and photographic evidence. Any information the place may provide is adequately represented by documentary evidence and it is unlikely that any further significant evidence could be gained from the physical fabric of the place.

(d) importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (d) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

Churchill House is an early example of a restrained style of Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style, (1960 -) with its strong shapes, large areas of glass, blank walls and off-form concrete. In addition, it displays a number of the other features of this style including: sloping and diagonal elements contrasting with horizontal and vertical members (glazing in the service section joining the east and south wings), precast concrete non-load bearing wall panels, precast fins for sun protection, and vertical slit windows (between the precast fins). Although several other examples of this style exist in Canberra, Churchill House is one of the earliest and the first non-government off-form concrete building. It demonstrates a more conservative approach to the style, most likely determined by its intended institutional office use, its location on Northbourne Avenue, and the requirement to comply with the policies and principles of the *Buildings (Design and Siting) Ordinance 1967*.

Churchill House, however, is not considered to be important for demonstrating the principal characteristics of the style when compared to other examples in the ACT. Whilst it displays characteristics of the style it does not display all of the characteristics of the style as strongly as many of the larger buildings of the national institutions in the ACT, such as the Cameron Offices, the

Carillon, the High Court of Australia, the National Gallery of Australia, the School of Music, as well as some of the more significant Territory examples such as the University of Canberra Student Residence Group 2 and the Woden Valley Library and Phillip Health Centre. Each of these examples are widely recognised as important examples of Brutalist buildings with their bold expressions of the style with an aggressive largeness of scale with large blocky shapes that contrast with each other and have much of the structure and services clearly expressed in the form of the buildings; each can be examined in more detail in their respective listings on the ACT Heritage Register or the Commonwealth Heritage Register.

As noted in criterion (a), Churchill House was the first building erected under the NCDC's design and siting policies, but it is not considered important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places as its role in the consequent development along Northbourne Avenue has not been shown to be influential or long lasting.

(e) importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (e) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

There is insufficient evidence that Churchill House exhibits design or aesthetic qualities that are valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT. Despite its Brutalist design and the aspiration of the original owners, the Trust, that the building would become a tourist attraction, there is insufficient evidence that the qualities are valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT. While there is some recognition of the aesthetic characteristics of the place through online photo-sharing platforms, it is still quite a small selection that cannot be said to be representative of the ACT Community's value of the place.

The Council acknowledges that Churchill House is valued by the Australian Institute of Architects (AIA) and other architects for reasons relating to its design and aesthetic qualities. The Council-endorsed *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 Institute, or the ACT architectural community, to be a cultural group for the purposes of the criterion.

(f) importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (f) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

Churchill House shows a degree of creative achievement in its combination of then emerging trends, concrete forming technology and various innovative solutions that combined to achieve a unified material palette that was at the forefront of modern design in Australia at the time. Yet while representing aspects Boyd's creative skill and experimentation, the building cannot be considered to be important in demonstrating these achievements to a high degree given the lack of resolution and fragmented execution, and a less than optimal outcome in performance.

Churchill House is an early example of Late Twentieth Century Brutalism in Canberra and was the first non-government off-form concrete building in Canberra. The design by Robin Boyd applied the design policies and principles he advocated to the NCDC as a member of the National Capital Planning Committee (NCPC).

The design split the building into three main components which integrated with landscaped spaces. The standalone north wing housed the Trust in a single storey, slightly below avenue level, with a second storey glass exhibition gallery on top allowing for public access and to open the site out to Northbourne Avenue. The gallery was designed to house Fellows' works and would allow for viewing 24-hours a day with the addition of night lighting. However, in the 1980s, due to ongoing maintenance issues related to the design of the gallery, it was removed and replaced with office space in a second storey in a complimentary design to the lower floor.

The rental spaces were split into the east and south wings which are almost identical buildings forming an 'L' shape with a services tower between them. The form of these wings are rectangular concrete boxes with one long facade of Corbusian-style strip windows and the other long facade covered in vertical concrete sun control fins with thin vertical slit windows.

All wings overlook the lower level landscaped courtyard and pond. The large NCDL mandated setback from Northbourne Avenue is landscaped with tall trees (*Eucalyptus* sp) and grass. Deciduous and evergreen plants around the building and in the courtyard provide lush greenery to offset the pale colours that were required by the design and siting policies.

Boyd's overall design of the place was a response to the NCDL policies of the time. He refined a style that was just gaining popularity in Australia in the late 1960s while accommodating client requirements. There has been considerable debate over the extent to which this building resolves these elements. The site has serious integrity issues that the Council cannot overlook. The demolition of the glass gallery has removed the most distinctive and creative feature of the design and siting, which included an almost street level access podium. As noted by the NCDL in 1978, this element was of particular significance in giving "partial openness of the side to Northbourne Avenue" and "the light construction of the exhibition building makes a nice foil against the solid office façade". Removing this feature and then the construction of a second storey office space on the podium, albeit in a sympathetic style, enclosed the courtyard and disturbed the balance and massing of the site as a whole. Additionally, the unsympathetic addition of external air-conditioning units detracts from the use of the Brutalist aesthetic.

Built from 1971 to 1972, it uses cast and precast reinforced concrete elements, including sun-screening, and construction systems that were common at the time. It is a good, but not high degree of creative achievement in the early days of Brutalism in Australia that accommodated NCDL and client requirements that suffers significantly from loss of integrity. Some of the more notable techniques employed, include:

- The use of disposable plastic formwork moulds to create a textured raw finish extended the technique of using thermoplastic formed moulds for cast concrete finishes, but while the process was relatively cheap and uniform, the finished surface was prone to air voids and failed to achieve a high quality;
- The use of L-shaped sun-screening 'planks' that integrate cladding and glazing, while striking in appearance from outside, suffer from poor insulation qualities, poor light penetration and, combined with low ceiling heights, create a visually restricted work place; and
- The minimalist glazing technique using H-section gaskets provide little insulation, are prone to leaking and as a bespoke system are difficult to retrofit.

All of these techniques and design features combined to eliminate unnecessary material and trades to produce a unified aesthetic of minimal materials and visible design features but, however aesthetically striking the result may be, the experimental nature of the techniques and their combination has not produced a successful building in any other than outward appearance. So while there is a high degree of creative achievement for its period, the end result, due to its shortcomings, cannot be considered to be important for those achievements.

(g) has a strong or special association with the ACT community, or a cultural group in the ACT for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (g) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

There is no evidence that Churchill House is highly valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. While the Trust has been, and continues to be, involved in providing fellowships to people that will then contribute to Australian society in various ways, there is no evidence that a cultural group, or the broader ACT community value the building for its relationship to the program or any of its output.

Additionally, the Council acknowledge that Churchill House is valued by the AIA and other architects for reasons relating to its design and aesthetic qualities. The Council-endorsed *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 Institute, or the ACT architectural community, to be a cultural group for the purposes of the criterion. This also applies to the Trust as a not for profit educational institution which is for the benefit of Australians, but is not representative of them and, as such, is not considered to be representative of the ACT community, or a cultural group in the ACT.

(h) has a special association with the life or work of a person, or people, important to the history of the ACT.

The Council has assessed Open Systems House (former Churchill House) against criterion (h) and is satisfied that the place does not meet this criterion.

The building is not a resolved example of the transitions Boyd was advocating at the time or exploring in his own work; rather his legacy in the ACT relates most strongly to the several commissions for private houses that reflect Boyd's role in promoting modernity among the early post-war infusion of a distinct group of clients and residents in the national capital, most of which would have grown out of personal relationships and associations that connect directly to Boyd's life and significance.

Robin Gerard Penleigh Boyd (1919-1971), as detailed in the background document, was a nationally and internationally renowned architect as well as a widely published and appreciated architectural critic. Churchill House was the last building that Boyd was working on when he died in 1971. He received few commissions to design large prestigious buildings and those that he did design met with limited praise. He was a proponent of the Brutalist style, yet his own designs tended to lack the uncompromising ethos of the style, instead referencing a Brutalist aesthetic in an essentially standard design. Churchill House has not been demonstrated to have a special association, i.e. beyond the ordinary that would be expected of an architect and a place they have designed, with Boyd's oeuvre. As an architect he was well known for his residential designs, in particular those that helped to define the Melbourne Regional style. Boyd's association with residential designs are already well represented in the ACT by the inclusion in the register of Manning Clark's House in Forrest, Fenner House in Red Hill, and 12 Marawa Place in Aranda. Although Churchill House is associated with Robin Boyd, it is not considered to have a special association, nor is the building prominent in, or representative of his body of work.

Churchill House has an association with the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust, which formed with the principal objective of perpetuating and honouring Sir Winston Churchill's memory by awarding 'Churchill Fellowships' that allow Australians to travel overseas for study and training. The Trust was established by a single major charity drive shortly after Winston Churchill's death in 1965. The drive raised over £2million. During the 1960s the Trust, as well as funding the fellowships, decided to

invest some of the initial capital funds in a new building for its national headquarters in Canberra. The building would also be a repository for Fellows' works and an investment by leasing space to other tenants for profit. Architect Robin Boyd was commissioned to design the new building in 1969 after the Trust was offered a prestige Northbourne Avenue site. Boyd died before the building was finished, but work was completed by his office by 1972.

In addition, the building is associated with a phase in Canberra's planning when the NCDC was establishing new principles and policies for the development of Northbourne Avenue. These principles and policies were developed using the guiding principles developed by the National Capital Planning Committee (NCPC), of which Boyd was a member and one of the key authors of the principles which were accepted by the NCDC to guide the application of the *Buildings (Design and Siting) Ordinance 1964*. Boyd's design of Churchill House followed these policies and principles and was the first test of their real world application. While this is an interesting aspect of the changing attitudes of various planning authorities, it fits into a context of evolving planning development that is represented by many other examples (as in the case of different suburbs reflecting evolving planning concepts). In applying the criteria the Council has to determine which, if any, of the places in that evolving context merit registration. Nearly every building in the ACT could be said to fit into a story of a particular design or planning context, or historical trend, but this does not mean that every place meets the threshold imposed by the criteria. An entry on the Heritage Register is valid to the extent that it establishes a level of significance that is strong and special that is therefore above the ordinary.

SITE PLAN

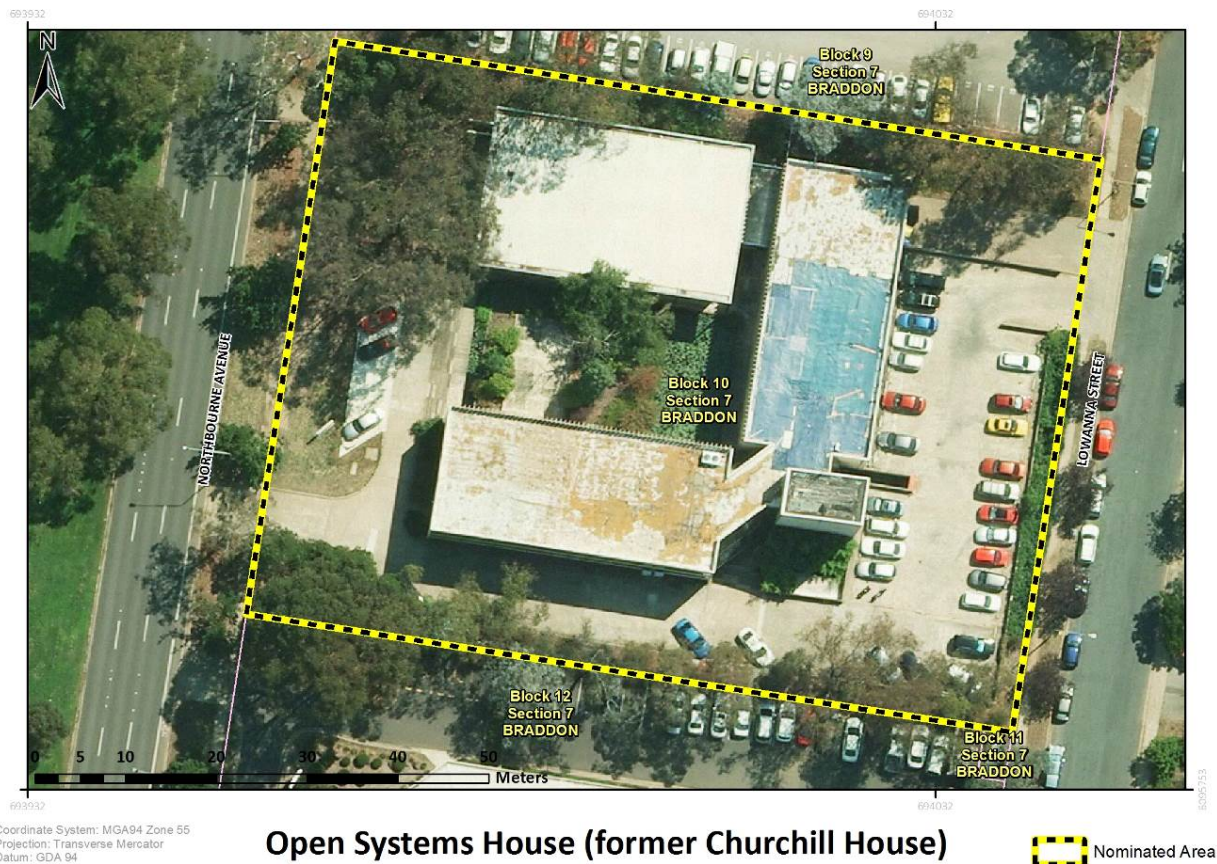


Image 1 Open Systems House (former Churchill House) site boundary (note: nomination boundary is the same as the block boundary)