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17/5/98**CLASSIFICATION BY NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (ACT)****PLACE NAME:**

Acton House

NOMINATED BY:

Classification Committee of the National Trust of Australia (ACT)

LOCATION OF PLACE:

Block 1, Section 24, CITY ACT.

FEATURES INTRINSIC TO THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLACE.

The place comprises:

The buildings and plantings on Block 1, Section 24, City ACT, as indicated on the accompanying site plan and description. Excluded is the building known as Block I facing Marcus Clarke Street.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Acton House, built as the Hotel Acton in 1927-49 is historically and socially important for having been one of the national capital's major hostels serving in particular married couples and families. Large numbers of people stayed in hostel accommodation upon their arrival in Canberra from its establishment until the 1960s.

From 1938/9 to 1946 the Acton was the first separate home for the Canberra University College, the first university in Canberra.

Consequently the complex has social and educational significance in the development of Canberra.

Designed by Commonwealth Architect John Smith Murdoch, Acton House is architecturally important in that it exemplifies the Federal Capital style. The complex, together with surrounding plantings, has aesthetic value within the city townscape.

SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS:

In accordance with S.54(1) of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991, the following requirements are identified as essential to the conservation of the heritage significance of this place. These requirements are prepared to implement the following conservation policy for the place:

That the building complex and its setting be conserved.

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

That a conservation plan be prepared for the place.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:

Acton House comprises a weatherboard double storey central block, with eight rendered brick pavilions. Four of the pavilions Blocks, A,B,C, and G are situated on an east-west axis on either side of the main block, and four, Blocks D,E,F and H are sited on a north-south axis north of Blocks G and C. A new wing, I lies to the east of the complex. The original front entry to the south has been altered by the conversion for the AIATSIS Library. There is infill of the corner galleries on each pavilion. Roofs are of hipped and gabled forms. The brick rendered garage west of the main block has had its original timber beams replaced with concrete. Two rendered pillars and the concrete and brick floor remain of the original carwash and pergola behind the garage block.

Landscape elements which remain from the original planting include the following trees:

three poplars (*Populus deltoides*) south of Block I (which have been identified as good specimens by botanist and former head of Parks and Gardens Professor Lindsay Pryor),

one oak (*Quercus robur*) between Blocks B and C,

six oaks (*Quercus canariensis*) along, Marcus Clarke Street,

two Californian Redwoods, *Sequoiadendron giganteum* in the court between Blocks D and E,

two Cypress Pines (*Cupressus arizonica* and *Cupressus sempervirens*) between Blocks D and I and

one Atlantic Cedar (*Cedrus atlanticus*) at the west end of Blocks G and H.

One of the original smooth-barked Chinese Elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*) remains on the building's southern entrance.

To the west side of the complex around the area there are seven eucalypts *Eucalyptus blakelyi* which remain from pre-settlement woodlands: one of these trees shows evidence of coppicing from regeneration.

The buildings house Government offices (a major one being the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies AIATSIS) and their condition is mostly good. Roof tiles have probably been replaced. There have been extensive internal alterations and there are numerous accretions to the buildings. The building complex needs further research to uncover its architectural development, and to identify how that development illustrates the evolution of the national capital in terms of population growth and the development of other institutions. Also requiring further analysis are the original garages, boilers, kitchen areas and internal fabric.

2. STATUS OF PLACE AT NOMINATION DATE:

Recorded by the National Trust of Australia (ACT) 1994.

Gazetted as interim Heritage Place register 24.4.98

Nominated to the Register of the National Estate: AHC decision to list.

3. BACKGROUND: ^{space}

The Hotel Acton (now known as Acton House), was opened in May 1927 as accommodation for Commonwealth Government public servants. It was designed as a hostel for lower level government employees but operated as a first level hotel with a liquor licence from 1928. The Depression forced the hotel's closure in 1930. It was later used for offices including the Patents Office.

It was refurbished in 1938. It was then occupied by the Canberra University College, an institution established by ^{ACT ordinance} ~~Commonwealth statute~~ which formed the basis of University life in the Capital. It was the first separately designated site for the College's use. Till then the College had shared accommodation with Telopea Park School and the Institute of Anatomy.

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The dining room became the Hall and the area now occupied by the IATSIS Library which was formerly the residents' main lounge, was divided to form a students' common room and the Library. Lecturers' rooms and administrative offices were in the front wings. The billiard room in the basement became first the Council Room and later a bomb shelter.

The College (which later merged to become the General Studies School of the Australian National University) became an intellectual centre for Canberra. Its faculties included arts, economics and the School of Diplomatic studies. Its staff and students included many people who are significant in the development of Canberra and of the nation. These included (and were not limited to) Sir Robert Garran who was chairman of the Council, Alec Hope and Manning Clark, Hope Tilyard (Lady Hewitt) who was the first married woman to become a university lecturer in Australia, Professors Bailey, Giblin, Fin Crisp, and Peter Karmel. Other Council members included Andrew Watson , Mrs Tilyard and Sir George Knowles. Malcolm Muggerridge was one of the people who gave public lectures there during the war. Many of its students also became prominent in the life of the city, the nation and in particular the diplomatic service.

Shortage of accommodation in Canberra led to other organisations moving into the Acton and limiting the College's space, most notably the Prices Commission headed by (Sir) Douglas Copland who later became Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University.

In June 1946, reflecting the post war growth of Canberra, the building once again reverted to hostel use and for almost thirty years it catered to married couples including those with children moving to Canberra. Since 1976, as Acton House the building has been used as government offices again.

Acton House forms one of a group of large hostels constructed by the government in the 1920s to deal with pressing, accommodation shortages in the national capital. The Hotel Canberra (built 1924) was Hostel No 1. the Hotel Kurrajong (built 1926) was Hostel No 2. Gorman House (built 1924-27 and originally known as the Hotel

Ainslie) was Hostel No 3, and the Hotel Acton (1927) was Hostel No 4. The hostels were a central aspect in the government's plans for developing Canberra and were erected for functional reasons, not for financial gain. They provided different levels of accommodation. Eventually twenty-six hostels were built in the national capital. Of these ten have been demolished. The survivors, including Acton, are the more permanent and impressive hostels. Acton was considered to be one of the more comfortably furnished and served professional, middle and senior level people. Some of the hostels were for workmen, some for single women and later hostels such as Reid and Mulwala were more basic fibro and timber structures primarily for young and junior public servants.

The hostels played a very important role in terms of their social and community functions. Many workers who came to Canberra had no alternative to hostels for early in Canberra's history the houses that had been built were for married couples and were in short supply. The Acton differed from the other hostels in that it catered specifically for married couples, including those with children. The support this gave the families, particularly new mothers transported away from their own families is a feature of great significance to many who stayed there.

The Hotel Acton was designed by John Smith Murdoch. He was Chief Architect of the Commonwealth Department of Works and Railways and was the first Commonwealth Architect. From 1911 until his retirement 18 years later Murdoch designed a number of significant buildings in Canberra. These include the Hotel Canberra, Gorman House, the Kingston Power House, the Provisional Parliament House and the West and East Block Secretariat Buildings. Murdoch forged a distinctive Federal Capital design style and he is a major figure in the story of Canberra's early development.

Given the large amount of building work undertaken by the Commonwealth at the time it is not surprising that some of the buildings of the period share certain features. The Hotel Acton and the Hotel Kurrajong particularly have similarities, and are consistent with the Hotel Canberra. The plan of the Acton consists of a two-storey central block which is the focus of the massing and which held most of the public and catering facilities. Then on either side and sited symmetrically, were two blocks of two-storey pavilions with courtyards in between. It was built of rendered brick, with a red brick base. Roofs were hipped and terracotta tiled. Acton was initially built with six pavilions extending from the main block, with garages located between pavilions D and E and A and F, and a nine-bay garage west of the main block. Near the rear of the hostel were a pair of tennis courts and a flower garden. Two additional two-storey wings were approved in 1949 (Blocks D and H), together with new staff bedrooms. Another block, I, was built parallel to Marcus Clarke Street in 1958.

Murdoch conceived the garden pavilion style for public buildings in Canberra, and Acton House is a compact example of the style. It was a style influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie style, which was continued by W.B.Griffin.

The buildings making up the Acton complex are aesthetically important for their symmetry, form, proportions, strong window placement and use of paired, multi-pane

double-hung sashes, range of surface textures (brick, rendered brick, weatherboard), and the range of gabled and hipped roof forms. Walls are unpainted brick- below sill height (with fine detailing in the use of bond), and painted, rendered brick above. This contrast (rendered and unrendered) is seen in other Canberra buildings of the period. Basement windows have a metal grille whose design is used widely in Canberra. On the main building there is a visually strong gable design. The detailing of the original pavilions is generally finer than that on the 1949 blocks although these blocks are consistent with the original buildings design and form. The courtyards and surviving plantings add to the place's aesthetic qualities.

There was a central main lounge, large dining room and kitchen and service areas. In addition to the main lounge there were lounges on each floor of each pavilion and recreation rooms including a billiards room.

The former Hotel Acton is part of a collection of similarly styled buildings by Murdoch in Canberra, and is a good example. The pavilions are functionally sited reflecting the need for natural light, circulation of air, privacy and quietness. It is easily recognised as a former hostel.

Acton House along with the Academy of Sciences, the Film and Sound Archive (the former Institute of Anatomy), and Ian Potter House (formerly Beauchamp House), form a precinct of low-scale buildings which are notable in the zone between the buildings of the Australian National University and the high-scale edifices of the Civic cityscape.

4. DISCUSSION AGAINST RELEVANT PRINCIPAL NATIONAL HISTORIC THEMES

Theme 8: Developing cultural institutions and ways of life, and 4.6: Remembering significant phases in the development of towns and suburbs.

Acton House has played a significant role in accommodating people moving, to the national capital. With its changed uses and alterations, it reflects closely the political, social and economic changes that have helped to shape Canberra. Acton is an important part of the collection of buildings which operated as hostels in this immigrant city. The provision of accommodation to newcomers is a major theme in the social history of the national capital. Hostels were major influences in the lives of their residents and played a part in the development of Canberra's community spirit.

It is significant as the first separately designated building of the first university in Canberra, the Canberra University College.

5. ANALYSIS AGAINST THE CRITERIA SPECIFIED IN SCHEDULE 2 OF THE LAND (PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT) ACT 1991:

Criterion (ii): A place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group.

The plan and form of the building, together with the design detailing, create a building of strong aesthetic value. The building's scale and its roof forms contribute to the landscape as do the nearby similarly styled buildings. Acton House's aesthetic importance is enhanced by trees remaining from the original plantings and pre-existing vegetation. The complex reflects the characteristics of the Federal Capital design style and is significant in assisting the understanding of early Canberra architecture.

Criterion (iii) A Place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost, or is of exceptional interest.

The Acton retains elements which demonstrate the period when large numbers of public servants and others lived in hostels in Canberra. They formed a significant part of the social life of the young city. Acton served in particular as a hostel for married couples and families.

Criterion (iv) A place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations.

Acton House is socially important to the Canberra community on account of the significant role the complex played in providing accomodation to large numbers of recently arrived Canberrans between 1927 and 1976. Hostels such as the Acton contributed to the development of community spirit in the National Capital.

It is significant too as the first designated home of the first university in Canberra, the Canberra University College. The College was established by Commonwealth statute and lecturers and students were or became prominent in the development of the city and of the nation.

Criterion (vii) A place which has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history.

Acton House built in 1927-49 as the Hotel Acton is historically significant for its role in providing accommodation for newly arrived Canberrans. It was one of the main hostels and is intimately associated with a major theme in Canberra's history, that of hostel life. The complex also reflects acute housing shortages in the national capital's past. The alterations and changed uses of the building illustrate changing economic, educational, political and social factors during Canberra's development.

It is significant as the first designated home of the Canberra University College, the first university in a city which now houses a number of universities.

Additional significance is attributable due to the fact that the complex was originally designed by Commonwealth Architect, J.S. Murdoch.

6. REFERENCES:

This citation is based on the Australian Heritage Commission citation for Acton House. The AIIC bibliography is as follows:

Federal Capital Advisory Committee. General Report. June 1921.

Freeman. Peter ed. The Early Canberra House: Housing in Canberra 1911-19. Canberra: Federal Capital Press, 1996.

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O'Connell, G. Hotel Acton Conservation Study. University of Canberra, 1994.

Pryor. L.D. and Banks, I.C.G. Trees and Shrubs of Canberra. Canberra, 1991.

Sparke. Eric. Canberra 1954-1980. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service. 1988

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→ National Trust of Australia (ACT) additional bibliog
The National Trust of Australia (ACT) extended the information available on the Acton by a series of interviews with people associated with the Acton, including Tom Owen, Registrar of the Canberra University College till its merger with the Australian National University, Lady Hewitt (Hope Tilyard), Leslie Lockwood, Michael Hodgkin, the last manager Alan Horth, Evelyn Young and Edyth Binkowski.

ACT - Laws Statutes etc. Canberra University
College Ordinance 1929, 1932, 1936, 1940, 1953-57

Prepared by Matthew Higgins (acting Classification Officer) in accordance with recommendations of the Classification Committee of the National Trust of Australia (ACT) May 1997 and corrected and amended by Judith Baskin, May 1998..