



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FAIRBRIDGE CRESCENT

(Blocks 19-27 Section 74 and Blocks 17-23 Section 75, Ainslie)

At its meeting of 4 June 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Fairbridge Crescent, Ainslie was not eligible for provisional registration.

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

HISTORY

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, p.6).

The Government provided housing in all manner of forms: hostels, hotels, detached residences, and flats. Well before Parliament's first sitting in Canberra in 1927, the Federal Government knew that it would need to provide housing for those relocating to the nation's capital.

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, p.6).

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

The Federal Capital Commission (FCC) was established in 1925 and set about providing housing for the expected influx of construction workers and public servants. In the year to 30 June 1927 the FCC approved construction of 545 Government houses. A year later 646 public servants had been transferred to Canberra with office and residential accommodation provided. This included houses, hotel and hostel accommodation (Wright, 2000, p.17).

The Depression was accompanied by a downturn in the transfer program and with the change of Government in 1930, the FCC was wound up and Canberra reverted to divided departmental control. A partly elected ACT Advisory Council was then established to provide residents of the ACT with representation on local matters. (http://www.library.act.gov.au/find/history/frequentlyaskedquestions/personal_stories/act_advisory_council,_1930-1974).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – FAIRBRIDGE CRESCENT, AINSLIE

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, p.28).

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

During World War II construction of Government houses in Canberra was halted leaving Canberra with an estimated shortage of 500 houses through the latter part of the war.

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, p.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.

Prefabricated Housing in Canberra

The construction of prefabricated houses in Canberra in the face of the shortage of materials and the increasing need for accommodation was pursued by the Department of Works and Housing from the beginning of the post-war period. By 1950, houses from Tocumwal Air Force base had been erected in O'Connor and monocrete houses built in Turner. A considerable number of demountable houses had been built in Narrabundah and Yarralumla for married construction workers (Wright, 2000, pp.30-36).

The Department of Works and Housing was also engaged in a wider, international search for prefabricated housing at this time to meet the national shortage of housing.

In 1949 and 1950 the Commonwealth Government organised research tours of the USA, Great Britain, Western Europe and Scandinavia to investigate alternative solutions for prefabricated houses. Harold Bartlett—of Leith Bartlett Architects and Engineers, the architects for the Red Hill Public Housing Flats—was a member of the 1950 delegation. One of the many manufacturers that this delegation visited was the H. Newsum, Sons and Co. Ltd. factory in Lincoln, England. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.175)

An indication of the NCPDC response to prefabricated housing is provided at a meeting in June 1950 to consider the siting of the Riley Newsums. The Committee felt that they should be 'placed in new subdivision in groups ranging from 50 – 150'. They should not be located on main avenues or 'the best areas'. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.176)

By the time the 500 Riley Newsums were being erected, a further 750 prefabricated houses had been ordered. It is not clear whether these came from the Riley Newsum factory. The Minutes of the 99th NCPDC meeting of May 1951 indicate that all were imported with designs adapted to Canberra conditions either by Works and Housing Canberra or by Head Office of Works and Housing Melbourne. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.176)

Riley Newsum Houses

They were designed for Australian conditions by Australian architect, A.B. Armstrong and fabricated in Britain by H. Newsum Sons and Co (under the direction of Mr James Riley) using Finnish and Swedish timber. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.176)

Armstrong designed two types of house, the CA1 and the CA4. The CA1 was a rectangular-shaped house, while the CA4 was a larger, "L"-shaped version. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.181)

In the early 1950s the Commonwealth Government accepted tenders for the construction of various types of prefabricated houses at a number of locations throughout Australia. Part of this program was the construction of 500 houses from H. Newsum, Sons and Co. Ltd., which were to be erected in Canberra for the cost of 625,000 pounds. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.176)

The components that made up the houses were manufactured in the Newsum factory in Lincoln, England, and shipped to Australia in large timber crates. The external walls, which incorporated the windows and doors, were made up of separate, 3' 4" wide (1010 mm) timber-framed panels. These were clad on the outside with a bitumen-coated, aluminium foil building paper, followed by vertical, "V"-jointed, pine weatherboards. The inside faces were lined with plasterboard, while internal walls were clad with plasterboard on both sides. Roof trusses were prefabricated in two separate sections, and then connected by hinges so that they could be opened up on site and secured with bolts. All of these—plus floor joists, floor boards, aluminium roof sheeting, purlins, ceiling joists, plasterboard ceiling panels and all hardware—were packed inside wooden crates that measured approximately 4-5 metres long, 2 metres high, and 1m wide. It was said that one crate could be carried on a three-ton truck. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.181)

Riley Newsum Houses in Canberra

Before the packs were delivered to the sites in Canberra, concrete foundation walls and stumps were set out, and hardwood bearers were laid on top. Once the packs arrived they were opened, and the floor joists were removed and fixed over the bearers. Floor boards were then laid to provide a working platform for the remainder of the assembly process. Beginning at one end, the wall panels along the longer walls were erected first. Joints between panels were later covered with a vertical weatherboard section to complete the cladding. Internal walls, roof trusses, gables and ceiling joists were then added, which helped to stabilise the external walls. The roof trusses of the CA1 type were set out at 6' 8" (2032 mm) centres. It was claimed that once the foundations were in place, it took 12 men one week to erect a Riley Newsum house. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.181)

It was also claimed that the houses were designed to cope with Canberra's climate, with their centrally located fireplace, "glass wool" ceiling insulation and wider eaves. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.181)

Between 1951 and 1955, more than 500 Riley Newsum houses were erected in Canberra and the surrounding areas as part of the Commonwealth Government's public housing program. They were located in Ainslie, Deakin, Duntroon, Narrabundah, O'Connor, Mt. Harman, Fairbairn and Mt. Stromlo. While many of these houses no longer exist (the nine at Mt. Stromlo, for example), a significant number do still remain, and are held in both public and private hands. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.182)

An indication of the NCPDC response to prefabricated housing is provided at a meeting in June 1950 to consider the siting of the Riley Newsum houses. The Committee felt that they should be 'placed in new subdivisions in groups ranging from 50 to 150'. They should not be located on main avenues or 'the best areas'. The NCPDC continued to have concerns about prefabricated housing in Canberra and in 1951, after inspecting the Riley Newsum houses then in the process of erection, they felt that 'these units compared unfavourably with orthodox housing... and that in the climate of Canberra would involve heavy maintenance costs'. However, they ultimately resigned themselves to the 'multiplication of relatively inferior structures', and stated it they 'should not be rushed into the better residential areas'. (Philip Leeson Architects, 2011, p.176)

DESCRIPTION

The Riley-Newsum homes are set in the curving streetscape of Fairbridge Crescent, Ainslie. The street trees are *Liquidambar styraciflua*, 12 - 14 m high, set 2m from the kerb. The verge is 7 m in width and crossed by single bitumen driveways. Mount Ainslie is visible to the south east. The aesthetic quality of the precinct is due to the vertical scale and seasonal colour of the street trees, and the repetition of form, scale and colour of the post WW II Riley-Newsum development.

The Riley-Newsum homes are mostly clad in vertical weatherboards, have gable metal roofs and internal brick chimneys. In some instances the original clusters of double hung timber windows have been replaced with aluminium sliders and there is variation in the set back and orientation of the homes.

There are two types CA1 rev. [section 74 blocks 19 - 27] and CA4 rev. [section 75, blocks 17 - 23]. The Riley-Newsum CA1 is rectangular in shape, with a floor area of approximately 80m². Internal configuration comprises: an entrance hall, living room, dining-room, kitchen, laundry, W.C. bathroom, built in cupboard space, two double bedrooms and one single room, ceiling height is 2.4m. The CA4 is an L-shaped floorplan, the same internal arrangements as the CA1.

Physical condition and integrity

The houses on Fairbridge Crescent, Ainslie have been modified in a non-consistent manner using different materials to the original. Most of the houses (10 out of 16) have had their weatherboard cladding and roofing replaced. Additionally, an example of dual occupancy development is present at No.22. The street trees are in good condition and contribute to the streetscape. Overall, Fairbridge Crescent, Ainslie has lost its overall integrity due to those modifications.

The streetscape, and private landscaping, evident along the street in 2015, is mature and well established. However, many front gardens, which largely contain a front hedge, are mature to the extent that height and growth have obscured the ability to view the general form and massing of the houses along the street. This has decreased the integrity of the street, and its dwellings, to be viewed as a cohesive whole.

SITE PLAN

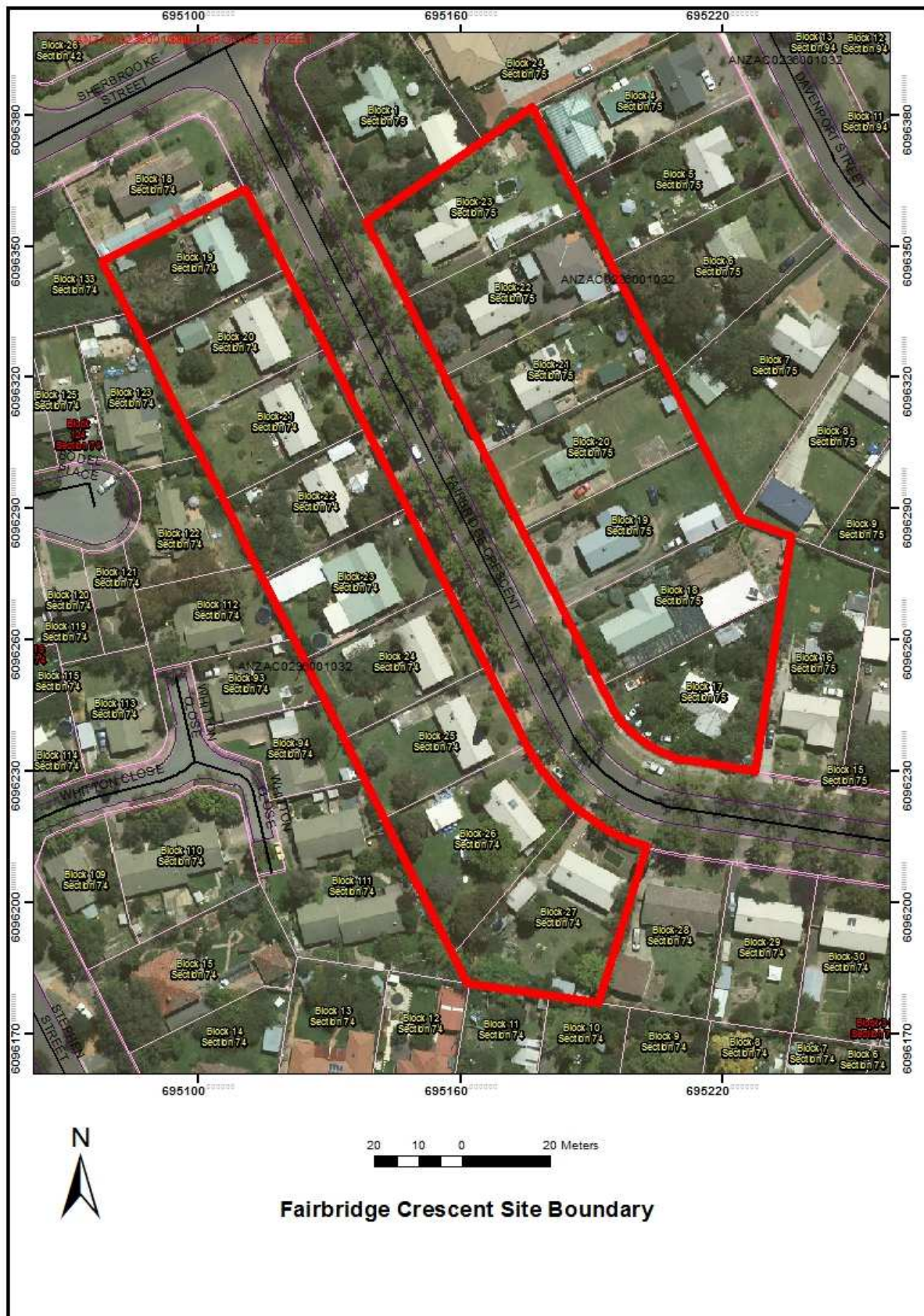


Image 1 Fairbridge Crescent, Ainslie, nominated area

IMAGES



Image 2 Original weatherboard (ACT Heritage, 2012)



Image 5 Riley Newsum Type CA4 (ACT Heritage 2012)



Image 3 Non-original weatherboard (ACT Heritage, 2012)



Image 6 Streetscape with Mount Ainslie in background (ACT Heritage 2012)



Image 4 Non-original weatherboard (ACT Heritage 2012)



Image 7 Riley Newsum Type CA1 (ACT Heritage 2012)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – FAIRBRIDGE CRESCENT, AINSLIE



Image 8 Riley Newsum Type CA4 (ACT Heritage 2015)



Image 10 Screenshot (ACT Heritage 2015)



Image 9 Screenshot (ACT Heritage 2015)

REFERENCES

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