

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R047

Name of Place: Forrest Townhouses

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 2 Arthur Circle and 3 Tasmania Circle FORREST 2603
Block 4 Section 11 of Forrest

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:
Date of Listing:		Level of Significance:
Citation Revision No:		Category:
Citation Revision Date:	November 2004	Style:

Date of Design:	Designer:
Construction Period:	Client/Owner/Lessee:
Date of Additions:	Builder:

Statement of Significance

The Forrest Townhouses are an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. They are an excellent example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style (1940-60) and are notable for displaying the design skill of the architect Sir Roy Grounds. The design incorporates many of the features that are specific to the style; widely projecting eaves, long unbroken roof line, narrow edge to roof and glass wall with regularly spaced timber mullions. The buildings also display elements of the Post-War International style, (1940-60), including cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass

The following design features are of additional significance; the steel roofing; overhang for shade; plain smooth wall surfaces; exposed rafters; the face concrete blockwork and courtyards; the double height living space overlooked from the gallery and open planning with the interiors opening out into the landscape; the limed ash joinery and paneling; the straw ceiling and exposed framing; the original detailing and type of finishes using natural materials.

The townhouses were awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1996.

The complex is important for its strong association with the talented architect Sir Roy Grounds who is considered a key practitioner in the Post-War Melbourne Regional style in Australia. Sir Roy Grounds played a significant role in Australia's and Canberra's cultural history; he is recognised as one of Australia's leading architects of the modern movement and was one of the most important architects to practice in Australia during the 1950s through to and including the 1970s. This is a major work of his in Canberra. Sir Roy Grounds was awarded the RAIA Gold Medal in 1968 and was knighted in the same year.

The townhouses have a special association with Grounds. Grounds designed one of the double storey townhouses and the single storey town house specifically for himself as his residence and place of work during the periods he was involved in important architectural work in Canberra, highlighting the significance of this building for its association with him. This project is his only town house design in Canberra.

The townhouses are one of the two most important works of architecture in Canberra by the nationally significant architect Sir Roy Grounds; the other being the Shine Dome, Acton, 1958.

Various town houses have been occupied by people who played a significant role in Australia's history: Sir William McMahon, Prime Minister of Australia 1970-72, lived in the single storey town house and Aldo Giurgola, the principle design architect of the New Parliament House, lived in the

western town house.

The architecture of this complex may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Post-War architecture styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories. The Forrest Townhouses can be compared and contrasted with the nationally significant government commissioned Northbourne Housing Precinct designed by Ancher Mortlock and Murray. The double height townhouses can be compared with the 'maisonettes', both with their origins in Le Corbusier's architecture; while both schemes incorporate courtyard housing. The generous planning and use of natural materials in the Forrest Townhouses can be contrasted with the more compact and frugal planning and light toned rendered finish of the Northbourne Housing.

Description

The group of five two storey town houses, an attached one storey bedsitter and a small detached single-storey town house, each with walled courtyards, was designed by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, with Roy Grounds being the design partner. The complex was designed in 1959 for Academics Anonymous Pty Ltd (including Grounds himself) and construction was completed in 1961. The group is a late example of a combination of two styles:

The Post-War Melbourne Regional Style (1940-60) with its widely projecting eaves (at the front only), long, unbroken roof line, narrow edge to roof and glass wall with regularly spaced timber mullions, and;

The Post War International Style (1940-60) with its cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass.

There are other examples of the combination of these two styles in Canberra at 24 Cobby Street, Campbell, 1963-64 and 4 Cobby Street, Campbell, 1970, both by Grounds.

There are other examples of the individual styles in Canberra including:

The Post-War Melbourne Regional Style (1940-60): Manning Clarke House, 1952, 11 Tasmania Circle, Forrest, (Boyd); Fenner House, 1956, 8 Monaro Crescent, Red Hill, (Boyd); 73 National Circuit, 1958, by E J Scollay (demolished) and three houses at numbers 42, 44 & 46 Vasey Crescent Campbell, 1961, (Grounds and Boyd), 3.

The Post War International Style (1940-60): 11 Northcote Street, Deakin, 1951-52, H Seidler and Associates; Birch House, 3 Arkana Street, Yarralumla, Noel Potter of Bunning and Madden and 10 Gawler Crescent, Deakin, 1956, Alex Jelinek.

The group of five two storey town houses is located side by side along Arthur Circle with high courtyard walls set on the north property boundary. Bamboo planting mostly obscures the courtyard walls, which provide private spaces directly off the living area. The northern facade of each town house has wide, double height, timber framed glazing. The southern facade faces onto the vehicle circulation area and extends to the south east of the site to a projecting single level unit (bedsitter) to the rear of the eastern end town house and around in a 'U' shape to covered carports. The carports are connected further to the single storey bed-sitter. The glazing to the southern facade is a repetitive rhythm of square timber framed windows with the upper level windows extending to the under side of the fascia. The smaller bathroom windows are fronted with block grilles, as are ground floor windows to the western and eastern units.

The entry to the first four townhouses is recessed providing a lobby with timber paneled flush doors and walls. Some entries have steel grille security gates. The entries are set to the side of each unit and open into a lobby and on into the north facing double height living space that extends for the full width of the town house. To the south of the living room and screened from it by sliding timber doors are the dining room and kitchen. These large sliding doors have been removed from some units. The living space is overlooked from the upper level, which is accessed via a carpeted concrete stair along the party wall. The stair is set behind timber-paneled cupboards and balustrade wall. At the upper level, a gallery extends across in front of the bathroom and dressing area located between the two bedrooms, each with south facing windows

and built in joinery.

There are three dominant planning themes to the two storey town houses.

The first theme is one of functional logic where the double height living space with full height glazing faces the northern enclosed courtyards, providing a play of three dimensional space and passive solar warmth. The remainder of the accommodation is to the south on two levels.

The second theme is one of 'promenade architecture' where movement is controlled and becomes a journey through the three dimensional space with varying views from the entry lobby, across the double height living space, up the stairs to the gallery with its view down into the living space and out across to the courtyard and beyond to Arthur Circle, and along the gallery to the southern second floor rooms.

The third theme is the use of natural materials and the absence of decoration, or applied finishes.

The single storey two bedroom flat has a simple plan with the living area facing north and the secondary rooms to the south.

Other architectural elements of the Post War Melbourne Regional style (1940-60) displayed by the building that relate to the external forms are:

- steel roofing,
- exposed rafters.

Other architectural elements of the Post War International style (1940-60) displayed by the building that relate to the external forms are:

- overhang for shade,
- plain, smooth wall surfaces.

The face concrete blockwork, both internally and externally, is important to the integrity of the town houses.

There are internal elements that are important to the integrity of the building: the double height living space overlooked from the gallery and open planning with the interiors opening out into the landscape, the limed ash joinery and paneling, the original detailing and type of finishes.

The town houses are constructed with load bearing face concrete blockwork, concrete slab floorings to both levels, and timber and steel framing to the flat metal deck roof. The timber-framed glazing is painted white externally on all but one unit. The internal finishes throughout are restrained: face concrete blockwork walls, limed ash joinery and paneling, carpeted floors and compressed straw ceilings with exposed rafters and beams.

The Forrest Townhouses can be compared and contrasted with the nationally significant government commissioned Northbourne Housing Precinct designed by Ancher Mortlock and Murray, 1962. The double height townhouses can be compared with the 'maisonettes', each with their origins in Le Corbusier's architecture; while both schemes incorporate courtyard housing. The generous planning and use of natural materials in the Forrest Townhouses can be contrasted with the more compact and frugal planning and light toned rendered finish of the Northbourne Housing.

The town houses can be compared with the three residences in Vasey Crescent, Campbell, 1961. These are detached houses on adjacent blocks designed by Grounds that incorporate the same use of materials in the Post-War Melbourne Regional style, face blockwork, timber structure and finishes, flat metal roofs and timber framed glazing with large areas of glass.

The town houses are well maintained and are in good condition. There are minor internal alterations to some; the steel entry gates were added and the timber-framed glazing on one of the units has been finished with a timber stain.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

The town houses are the only town houses designed by Grounds in Canberra; Grounds also designed some private residences in Canberra. They exhibit elements of his work that combine rational and economic planning with the use of natural materials. Grounds designed the town houses as a speculative venture. Of the six townhouses, two were constructed for specific clients, Professor J Davidson from the ANU and Colonel A H Gibson, a retired army officer and Melbourne resident. Grounds' own flat was the third from the west and the single storey walled courtyard flat, facing Tasmania Circle was used as the Grounds, Romberg & Boyd's office in Canberra. The eastern unit was leased to a local architectural firm and the bedsitter to the rear of this unit had an interconnecting door so that it could be either combined with the unit or let as a separate bedsitter, or caretaker's unit.

It appears that the two clients and Grounds formed a company called Academics Anonymous Pty Ltd, which own the flats. The office also served as the residence of Ground's Romberg & Boyd full time architect assistant, Fritz Suenderman and family. Grounds would stay in Canberra for short periods while working on the major commissions that he had received during the early 1960s.

The courtyard walls built on the Arthur Circle front boundary line were a departure from the Garden City planning which was the dominant philosophy for Canberra. They did not comply with NCDC guidelines, were demolished, and then later rebuilt with the requirement that planting hide the walls. Face concrete blockwork, while primarily used for its aesthetic qualities, was readily available in Canberra and consistent in quality, unlike bricks at the time that were in short supply and of poor quality. Grounds also used face blockwork for the CSIRO Phytotron Building, 1963, Canberra and the McNichol House South Yarra.

The architecture of the double height townhouses was influenced by the work of Le Corbusier in the 1920s. Le Corbusier's first design of his "model house" was named Maison Citrohan, after the French car company because he believed it to be as efficient as the new machines, which at that time were transforming twentieth century western life. In his book, "Vers une Architecture", Grounds proposed that houses like Maison Citrohan would replace the houses of previous times, which he felt made poor use of space with their illogical grouping of a number of large rooms. Instead he said "we must look upon the house as a machine for living in or as a tool". This new form of dwelling was to have a machine age imagery and not have a pitched roof, it would also have smooth walls and windows like those of factories. A restaurant in Paris often visited by Le Corbusier and his artist friend Ozenfant inspired Maison Citrohan. Later examples of Maison Citrohan designed by Le Corbusier raised the living space one level above the ground and a concrete frame replaced the load bearing masonry structure of his first designs. The best example of this house is in the Weissenhof Estate, Stuttgart, Germany, built in 1927.

The architecture of the single storey walled courtyard townhouse was influenced by the work of Mies van der Rohe in the 1930s. Mies first designed his courtyard house type as an exhibition house for the Berlin Building Exposition in 1931; un-built designs included the House with Three Courts, 1934, and the Ulrich Lange House, Krefeld, 1935.

The buildings in Canberra with which he or his partners are associated are: Professor Manning Clark's House, 1952, 51 Tasmania Circle (Boyd); Professor Fenner's House, 1953, 8 Monaro Crescent, Red Hill (Boyd); Dr Hilary Roche House, 1954, Bedford Street, Deakin (Boyd); Australian Academy of Science, 1958 (Grounds) (now the Shine Dome); Holy Trinity Lutheran National Memorial Church, 1961, Turner (Romberg); three houses in Vasey Crescent, Campbell, 1961 (Grounds & Boyd assisting); 24 Cobby Street, Campbell, 1963-64 (Grounds), W G Verge House, 1963, 204 Monaro Crescent, Red Hill (Boyd); Zoology Building ANU, 1963-8, (Boyd), CSIRO Phytotron Building, 1963, (Grounds), Sir Otto Frankel House (4 Cobby Street), Campbell, 1971, (Grounds), and the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Headquarters, 1968-72, Dickson (Romberg & Boyd, completed by Neil Clerehan).

The Forrest Town houses have been sought after and at different times occupied by prominent people. Aldo Giurgola AO owned the western most town house from about 1981 until recently. Sir William and Lady McMahon owned and occupied, at various times, the single storey town house. Other units have been owned by various academics including architect Professor J Brine OM, past

Dean and head of the University of Canberra's Faculty of Environmental Design.

The town houses were built by Civil and Civic.

The complex is highly valued by the RAIA as an excellent example of this style of architecture by a leading nationally significant architect. The RAIA considers the complex to be of national significance and it is listed on the RAIA National Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture. It was awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1996, an award for places of architectural significance that deserve heritage protection.

From an educational point of view, the heritage aspects of architectural and building form, in addition to the space, structure and materials, are most readily identified through in situ experiences. Documentation, and access to documentation of many heritage buildings, is often limited and even where there is full documentation, including that incorporated in heritage citations, this material can only ever be an inadequate substitute for the full educational value of experiencing the building, both externally and even more importantly internally. This is a special building, which contributes to its significance and educational heritage value both nationally and locally.

Sir Roy Grounds

Sir Roy Grounds (1905-81) established his practice with Geoffrey Mewton in Melbourne in 1932 after travelling in Europe and America. He ended this practice in 1936, travelling and working in England until 1939 when he returned to Australia and later worked on defence buildings during World War II. In 1953 he formed the practice of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd Architects.⁷ This was a leading firm in Melbourne architecture where the three partners produced their own designs and sometimes shared their supervision work when one of them was travelling abroad.⁸ In 1962 he left this practice and worked in his own practice, Roy Grounds & Company.

Grounds is recognised as one of Melbourne's and Australia's leading architects of the modern movement. He was awarded the RAIA Gold Medal in 1968 and knighted in the same year.

Professor Joseph Burke, Professor of Fine Arts, Melbourne University, believed that "The architecture of Grounds is not only extraordinarily inventive but distinguished by an uncanny tact of proportion".

Grounds designed many residential buildings and some major public buildings in Melbourne and some in Canberra. From the 1930s and especially during the 1950s and through to the 1980's, Grounds was at the forefront of Melbourne modern architecture where "Functionalism combined with structural and geometric determinism fashioned the architecture of the decade"⁵. His important works in Victoria include: the Henty House, Oliver's Hill, Frankston, 1952; his own house and adjoining townhouses Hill Street, Toorak, 1953; National Gallery of Victoria, 1959-68; Victorian Arts Centre, 1969-84; and numerous residential flats.

In 1954 Grounds designed and had constructed, as a speculative venture, his own attached house, a single storey bed-sitter and three double height apartments at 24 Hill Street, Toorak, Victoria. These were constructed in bagged and painted brickwork with flat built-up membrane roofs. The Toorak development is in the Post War Melbourne Regional style, however, the wall and roof finishes are not similar to the Forrest town houses. The Royal Victorian Institute of Architects awarded the Melbourne complex the annual "Street Architecture Medal" in 1955. It seems that the success of this venture in Melbourne and the possibility of extensive work in Canberra might have influenced him in the decision to build and partly finance the Forrest project.

Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991

(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time

The creativity of the architect Sir Roy Grounds is apparent in the design of the Forrest Townhouses, 1962. The complex is one of the two most important works of architecture in

Canberra by the leading nationally significant architect Sir Roy Grounds; the other being the Shine Dome, Acton, 1958.

The use of a 'Corbusian' double height living space with the open upper level gallery, was innovative planning at this time in Australia and represented a departure from single level apartment or townhouse designs in Canberra.

The architecture of the single storey walled courtyard townhouse was influenced by the work of Mies van der Rohe.

The Forrest Townhouses can be compared with the nationally significant government commissioned Northbourne Housing Precinct designed by Ancher Mortlock and Mussay. The double height townhouses can be compared with the 'maisonettes' while both schemes incorporate courtyard housing.

These are the only townhouses designed by Sir Roy Grounds in Canberra.

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

The Forrest Townhouses are a significant example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style (1940-60) and are notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Sir Roy Grounds. Many of the main characteristics of the style are exhibited here; widely projecting eaves, long unbroken roof line, narrow edge to roof and glass wall with regularly spaced timber mullions. It also exhibits some of the particular architectural elements specific to the Post-War International style (1940-60) including cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass.

The following design features are of additional significance; the steel roofing; overhang for shade; plain smooth wall surfaces; exposed rafters; the face concrete blockwork and courtyards; the double height living space overlooked from the gallery and open planning with the interiors opening out into the landscape; the limed ash joinery and paneling; the straw ceiling and exposed framing; the original detailing and type of finishes using natural materials.

The complex is highly valued by the RAIAs as an excellent example of this style of architecture by a leading nationally significant architect. The RAIAs consider it to be of national significance and it is on the RAIAs National Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture. The complex was awarded the RAIAs ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1996, an award to places of architectural significance that deserve heritage protection.

The town houses are relatively unaltered and are a very good example of Grounds's work where he was successful in combining the regional content of Melbourne architecture with the international style. The town houses can be compared with the three residences in Vasey Crescent, Campbell.

Sir Roy Grounds is considered a key practitioner in the Post-War Melbourne Regional style in Australia.

The townhouses are greatly valued by the residents, including the present and past owners.

(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 or being lost, or is of exceptional interest

(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

(v) a place which is the only known or only comparatively intact example of its type

The Forrest Townhouses is the only known example of a complex that includes both the 'Corbusian' double height living space and the Miesian courtyard house in the one complex designed by the one architect in the same architectural style in Canberra.

The 'Corbusian' double height space has only recently been incorporated into apartment designs in Canberra, however, these are usually without windows that facilitate cross-flow ventilation and do not incorporate natural materials and finishes.

(vi) a place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principal characteristics of that class

The Forrest Townhouses are a notable design in the Post-War Melbourne Regional style. The complex contains many of the key elements of the style. It solves a particular functional problem in a significant manner.

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

The complex is important for its strong association with Sir Roy Grounds who played a significant role in Australia's cultural history. He was one of Australia's most important architects, and this is a major work in his career in Canberra.

Sir Roy Grounds was awarded the RIAA Gold Medal in 1968 and was knighted in the same year.

The townhouses have a special association with Grounds. One of the double storey townhouses and the single storey town house, were specifically designed by Grounds for himself as his residence and place of work during the periods he was involved in architectural work in Canberra.

Various town houses have been occupied by people who played a significant role in Australia's history: Sir William McMahon, Prime Minister of Australia 1970-72, lived in the single storey town house and Aldo Giurgola, the principle design architect of the New Parliament House, lived in the western town house.

(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site

Through its architectural style, planning and urban form, these townhouses are a valuable educational resource for designers and planners. The architecture is characteristic of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style. It also displays some characteristics of the Post-War International style.

The architecture of the townhouses may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Post-War Architectural styles and the heritage value is enhanced by its educational worth for students of architecture. Experiencing heritage buildings enables the visitor to locate the building in its historical and environmental contexts and to place it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories. These experiences readily enable the establishment, understanding and interpretation of the building's heritage value and significance. This building is an excellent example of the style. Its innovative planning contributes to its significance and educational heritage.

The townhouse complex is the earliest and possibly the only true example in Canberra of the design philosophy of Le Corbusier's Maison Citrohan that includes a double height living space. They are also the only known examples of a complex that includes both the 'Corbusian' double height living space and the Miesian courtyard house in the one complex designed by the one architect in the same architectural style in Canberra. It is a refined and accomplished work of architecture.

The Forrest Townhouses can be compared and contrasted with the nationally significant government commissioned Northbourne Housing Precinct designed by Ancher Mortlock and Murray. The double height townhouses can be compared with the 'maisonettes'; both have their origins in Le Corbusier's architecture and both incorporate courtyard housing. The generous planning and use of natural materials in the Forrest Townhouses can be contrasted with the more compact and frugal planning and light toned rendered finish of the Northbourne Housing.

References

1. Conversation with Fritz Suenderman. (Original working drawings).
2. Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds. Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present. Angus & Robertson 1989.
3. Ibid
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5. Donald Leslie Johnson. Australian Architecture 1901-1951 Sources of Modernism. Sydney University Press 1980.
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Other Information Sources