

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R091

Name of Place: Bowden House

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 11 Northcote Crescent DEAKIN 2600

Block 8 Section 9 of Deakin

Listing Status:		Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:		Level of Significance:	
Citation Revision No:		Category:	Residential
Citation Revision Date:	1995	Style:	Post-War International

Date of Design:	1951-52	Designer:	Harry Seidler & Associates
Construction Period:	1955	Client/Owner/Lessee:	
Date of Additions:		Builder:	

Statement of Significance

The 'Bowden House' at 11 Northcote Crescent Deakin is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. The house is a very good early example of the Post-War International Style (1940-1960), The design incorporates features which are peculiar to the style including cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass.

The house is Canberra's first true architectural example of the rationale of Bauhaus principles. It still exhibits most of these principles making it a significant example of his work.

The architecture of this building may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Post-War Architectural styles.

Harry Seidler is recognised as one of Australia's leading architects of the modern movement. Seidler's recognition of this house as a key example of his early work highlights the significance of this house for its association with him.

Description

The house was designed by Harry Seidler and Associates for Mr I G Bowden in 1951-52 and construction was completed in 1955¹. The building is an example of the Post-War International Style (1940-1960) with its cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass².

The original house was an excellent example of Seidler's early work in Australia, which is predominantly found in Sydney. The only owner, Mr Bowden, believes that it was Seidler's first commission outside Sydney³. Seidler highlights this house in his writings as an example which demonstrates the design philosophy that was central to his architecture during this period of his work⁴. It displays similar forms, materials and design principles seen in his larger more well known houses such as the R Seidler House at Turrumurra (1947-50), the house at Curragul Place Turrumurra (1953) and the Dr S Fink House at Newport (1949-51)⁵.

The house was a rectangular, almost square, split level plan set diagonally across the sloping site with the carport excavated into the site at the low side, under the higher split level.

The off centre entry is approached up a stair of six reinforced concrete cantilevered open treads with a simple pipe handrail. It is located under the roof line within the cubiform and given prominence by the random stone walls. The front door opens into a random stone paved lobby behind a quarter height random stone fire place with a tall slender white rendered central chimney. The entry is on an axis with and parallel to the full height and full length living room north west facing glazing. This glazing extends towards the kitchen and the axis originally onward to the landscape through the kitchen door. The entry emphasises the juxtaposition of materials that was important in Seidler's work with the play of rough stone with smooth render and glass.

The split level planning divides the residence into living spaces and rest areas. The design exploits the interplay of horizontal and vertical space with planning themes centred on the living room. The living room rear wall, which separates it from the upper sleeping areas, is lined in T+G panelling. The room opens out to the north west through full height steel framed sliding glass doors onto a terrace. The terrace has a wide overhanging soffit which is angled specifically to allow winter sun to penetrate deep into the room but to prevent the hot summer sun from entering.

Originally the main bedroom could overlook the living room from the upper level with curtains dividing the rooms when privacy was required, however the bedroom has now been enclosed.

The upper bedroom level is approached by a centrally supported double beam, open tread timber stair echoing the theme of the entry stair. The corridor at this level is a secondary axis parallel to the main axis. Originally there was glazing at both ends of the house that allowed views along the corridor and into the landscape. This axis was emphasised externally by a stone blade wall which extended east from the second bedroom, and culminated at the west end in the balcony off the main bedroom.

The upper level consisted originally of two bedrooms, a study and bathroom where the ceiling, like the lower level, followed the roof pitch. With the addition of two bedrooms, a bathroom and the enclosing of the main bedroom and its balcony, the original planning themes to the upper level have been predominantly changed. The themes involved the external form of the house extending into the landscape via the use of low level walls perpendicular to the perimeter walls of the house and adjacent to glazing, reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe's designs in the 1920's. The small east side terrace separated the second bedroom from the utility area and provided an external space to the east. This terrace was rarely used by the owner⁶.

The north west wall, which extends from the terrace, reinforces the internal division from entry to living and defines the change in the terrace structure from on ground to suspended structure at the west end and maintains the design intent of extending the house into the landscape.

The carport was located under the main bedroom and study taking advantage of the sloping site. The cantilevered bedroom balcony projected towards the mountain views which are now obscured by planting and development. The cantilever was used to emphasise the extension of the form of the upper level and its structure with the balustrade side detached so as not to interfere with the stone wall and the reading of the building mass. With the enclosure of the balcony and carport these elements are now lost.

The house is set centrally on the large block. It is constructed of random stone walls, rendered cavity brickwork, suspended concrete slabs, steel and timber roof framing and a metal deck roof.

The garden originally had a small number of established native trees but now has a well established garden.

The major architectural elements that are peculiar to the Post-War International Style (1940-1960) and that are displayed by this building relate to the external forms⁷. They are:

- cubiform overall shape,
- large sheets of glass.

Other architectural elements of this style displayed by the building that relate to the external forms are:

- overhanging for shade,

- plain smooth wall surfaces,
- Corbusian window motif,
- contrasting texture.

The major architectural elements listed above place this building in the Post-War International Style (1940-1960).

Condition and Integrity

The original cantilevered balcony off the main bedroom, which has now been enclosed but is structurally intact, is an element of the style. This has the potential to be reinstated.

There are internal elements that are important to the integrity of the building: the stone fire place, the sloping ceilings, the split level division of living and sleeping areas, the detailing and type of finishes and the staircase.

The roof design was originally detailed specially so that there was no box gutter at the low point of the roof, instead the membrane roof had a 'valley' along its length which occurred along the line of the terrace glazing, thus emphasising the axis⁸. This detail was not built and the roofing is metal deck with a box gutter, a possible cost saving measure.

The building has been altered and extended twice, the first time in 1957-60 by Seidler and the second time in 1978 by the ACT architect C G Cummings⁹.

The Seidler work entailed the addition to the north east of two bedrooms, a new laundry with the kitchen being extended into the original laundry space and the extension of the dining room into the court with a small recessed terrace to the north east. The original design aesthetic was maintained with matching wall finishes and roofing.

The later alterations, although carried out due to changes in life style of the owners, have detracted from the original design philosophy. The alterations to the main bedroom were firstly the enclosure of the cantilevered balcony and secondly the closing off of the internal open view from the bedroom down over the lower living room. The other alterations were to the study and dining room: the external study door was deleted and a cupboard installed, and the north east recessed terrace off the dining room was enclosed to extend the dining room.

Of all the later alterations the enclosure of the main bedroom balcony has been the most significant; at the western side of the house it has changed the external appearance. This design feature was a major expression of the internal spaces, structure and architectural style.

Background/History

The residence is believed to be the only detached private residence Seidler has designed in Canberra and it exhibits much of the design philosophy of this period which had as its origins the rationale of the Bauhaus movement.

Harry Seidler arrived in Sydney in 1948 from the USA after studying under and working for some of the leading architects of the modern movement, such as Gropius, Breuer, Albers and Niemeyer. He is recognised as one of Australia's leading architects and the first architect in Australia to express fully the principles of the Bauhaus¹⁰. He was awarded the RAI A Gold Medal in 1976. He designed many of Australia's major residential and commercial buildings. Examples of his work in Canberra include medium density housing in Campbell, Garran and Yarralumla, and the Barton Trade Offices which is a large precast concrete office building near the Parliamentary Triangle, Barton.

The residence was built by Plimmer and McPhail.

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 design of the residence in 1951-52 in the Post-War International Style (1940-1960) represented a new architectural style in Australia at that time. The earliest notable Australian examples built in the style date from the late 1940's including the R Seidler House Turrumurra 1948, by Seidler and the Stanhill Flats Melbourne 1948, by Frederick Romberg¹¹.

The house represents the Bauhaus design philosophy of Seidler during this period of his work.

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

The house exhibits the particular architectural elements peculiar to the Post-War International Style (1940-1960) including cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass.

The two stairs, fire place, angled soffit overhanging for shade to the living room and terrace, Corbusian window motif, plain smooth wall surfaces and contrasting textures, detail and finishes are design features that are of additional significance.

The house is Canberra's first true example of the rationale of the Bauhaus and is a good example of Seidler's work.

The residence is well detailed and well built and is valued by the RAIA as a very good example of this style of architecture by a prominent Australian architect.

(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

(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

(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

Harry Seidler played a significant role in Australia's cultural history. In 1976 he was awarded the RAIA Gold medal. The 'Bowden House' is featured in publications and is prominent in Seidler's own publication of his early work in Australia titled 'Houses Interiors and Projects'¹². It is believed Seidler uses the 'Bowden House' in lectures as an example that typifies his early work.

(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 this building may be a valuable educational resource for designers. Its external architecture is characteristic of the Post-War International Style (1940-1960) and the internal play of forms and levels are important themes in this style of architecture.

References

- 1 Department of the Environment, Land and Planning (DELPL). Building File for Block 8 Section 9 Deakin.

- 2 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds. Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present. Angus and Robertson 1989.
 - 3 Conversation with Mr Bowden, only owner of the house.
 - 4 Harry Seidler. Houses interiors and projects. Horwitz 1959.
 - 5 Harry Seidler opcit and Donald Leslie Johnson. Australian Architecture 1901-51 Sources of Modernism. Sydney University Press 1980.
 - 6 Bowden opcit.
 - 7 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds opcit.
 - 8 DELP opcit.
 - 9 DELP opcit.
 - 10 Jennifer Taylor. Australian Architecture Since 1960. RAIA 1990.
 - 11 Donald Leslie Johnson. Australian Architecture 1901-51 Sources of Modernism. Sydney University Press 1980.
 - 12 Harry Seidler opcit.
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Other Information Sources