

# Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

**RSTCA No:** R125

**Name of Place:** Belconnen Library

**Other/Former Names:**

**Address/Location:** Chandler Street BELCONNEN 2617

Block Section of Belconnen

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	2005	Level of Significance:	Local
Citation Revision No:	0	Category:	Civic
Citation Revision Date:		Style:	Modern

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Date of Design:	19	Designer:	Robin Gibson & partners
Construction Period:	19	Client/Owner/Lessee:	NCDC for Dept Interior
Date of Additions:		Builder:	

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## Statement of Significance

The Belconnen Library, 1982, is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. It is a good example of the combination of two styles, the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its Cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, large sheets of glass, plain, smooth wall surface, and the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style (1960-) with its strong shapes boldly composed, expressed reinforced-concrete, large areas of blank wall and off-form concrete. It is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Robin Gibson.

The following design features are of additional significance; the perimeter spaces including the courts and path, the contrasting non-rectangular shapes, the clerestory and horizontal (Corbusian window motif) glazing, the deep concrete fascia overhanging for shade, assertive cantilevering, the bridging path over the entry, and original detailing and finishes.

The rationalist design of the complex demonstrates an important development in architectural style in the period of the NCDC.

The library was awarded the RAI A ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion in 1982.

The complex is important for its strong association with the talented architect Robin Gibson who is considered one of Australia's most important mainstream modernist architects of this period. Robin Gibson played and still plays a significant role in Australia's cultural history. He is one of the most important architects to practise in Queensland and this is his only work in Canberra. Robin Gibson was awarded the RAI A Gold Medal in 1989.

The architecture of this complex may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories.

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## Description

Belconnen Library designed by Robin Gibson & Partners for the NCDC and constructed in 1981 is a very good example of the combination of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its Cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, large sheets of glass, plain, smooth wall surface, and the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style (1960-) with its strong shapes boldly composed, expressed reinforced-concrete, large areas of blank wall and off-form concrete 3.

The growth of Canberra from Griffin's plan to the "Y Plan" is evident in the development of Woden and Belconnen (8km from Canberra Civic Centre). These two new town centres were planned to cater for the increase in population and the need for government office space to house the expanding public service and associated services.

The Cameron Offices were the first major buildings to be built in Belconnen. They formed part of the original town plan in which the aim was to provide a relatively compact pedestrian oriented scheme on a north south axis following the slope of the land from housing, to the south through the Cameron Office areas, transport interchange and shopping centre on to the manmade Lake Ginninderra, which was to have cultural buildings and housing along its shore.

This town-planning proposal was halted by the location of the Belconnen Mall, Belconnen's major shopping centre, west of its intended site, which was due north of the Cameron Offices. The library is located on part of that site north of the Cameron Offices and near to the Belconnen Bus Interchange.

The bush-hammered finish, exposed concrete library building is set back from Chandler Street with an intimate terraced forecourt plaza to the east side of the library. A major pedestrian path extends along the northern side and a secondary court is located to the south. The western façade was originally open to the **Park**, however, this is now closed off by the Swanson Plaza building.

The library was designed to be seen from all four sides and is approached along the northern path from both directions, from the main shopping centre to the west and from the educational precinct to the east, including the University of Canberra, via a road underpass. Deep perimeter insitu-concrete fascias define the cubiform shape of the building while the lower sculptured walls are curved in places and have sections "cut out" to create contrast and interest as well as emphasise internal function. The horizontal deep fascias create deep dark shadows below the fascia giving emphasis to the horizontal, while allowing a play of shadows across the curved and recessed surfaces of the facades. The external eaves soffits are lined with flush jointed fibre cement sheet. The glazing throughout is frameless silicon jointed with the full height glazing sill formed by an upstand "kicker" that allows for a continuous un-bush-hammered skirt.

The entry is given emphasis by the curved northeast corner wall and is set back slightly from the corner and recessed into the façade. It is approached off the eastern side plaza and is protected from the weather by an overhanging concrete hood that forms the upper level walkway. To the south of the entry the library façade is given added strength with a cubic concrete form set flush with the fascia that houses the stair and lift up to the first floor community facilities.

The entry foyer is a double height space with a generous lobby around the front counter. The counter area has been altered and includes unsympathetic timber screening that is not in keeping with the aesthetic of the library. The library is open planned and the external bush-hammered insitu concrete finish extends inside to all the concrete walls. Generally the book stacks are located away from the perimeter walls allowing the perimeter areas to be set aside for desks, carrels and small reading areas. The original design separated the adult and children areas with the smaller children's area in the southwest corner around to the left of the entry. This delineation is still in use. An adult reading area was located to the right of the entry, behind the northeast curved external wall. This space is given added delineation by the cantilevering curved concrete enclosed upper level fire stair that protrudes into the space from the north external wall. This area is now predominantly used for book stacks. The western side was designated for reading and carrels and is presently used as a reading area and for

periodicals. This space is well light. The external western concrete wall is designed as a beam to provide narrow horizontal mid-level slot glazing in the perimeter wall while eastern light extends into the space from overhead where the ceiling is raised to provide clerestory glazing, creating a bright and pleasant space. Externally this raised structure has been designed to incorporate the "Belconnen Library" signage facing out to the shopping centre.

To the southern and **western sides** the external walls, under the continuous fascia, are recessed in places to allow protected full height glazing with views out to the **western park** and southern court. At these recesses, one end of each of the external walls is curved, reinforcing the curve of the north east corner of the library. Internally unsympathetic partitioning providing expanded staff areas hides these curved walls. The internal concave forms are important elements that contrast with the convex curve of the stair and the overall cubic form of the library in general. Adjacent to the children's area the spaces that project out towards the southern court have raised ceilings and clerestory glazing similar to the western reading area.

Public rest rooms are located adjacent to the entry lobby to service both the library and the upper level community room. They are approached off the lobby from the library and can be approached separately off the stair and lift lobby. The staff facilities are located within the southwest staff area, away from the external wall.

The structure is set out on a square grid, approximately 14x14 metres, with circular concrete columns supporting the roof framing. The columns generally are inset from the perimeter fascia except for the northeast corner isolated column that is placed at the external corner for both structural necessity and as a defining design element to the path and library entry. The perimeter columns are placed within the wall along the north façade but are generally set back from the other facades. The library ceiling is a well-detailed white painted plasterboard lined one-way 'beam system'. Its junctions with the various curved forms and integrated services are well detailed.

The building is two storey at the northeast corner. The upper level community meeting room is approached from the stairs and lift located to the south of the library main entry, across an upper level outdoor path that bridges over the entry lobby. This provides an interesting promenade as well as out of hours security. The path has a stainless steel balustrade along the outer side while full height glazing along the library side allows an extended view back down into the library foyer. The community meeting room has been given added interest with contrasting convex and concave concrete walls and ribbon frameless glazing enabling extensive views to the north. A kitchenette is set to one side.

Other architectural elements of the Late Twentieth-Century International style displayed by the building complex that relate to the external forms are:

- overhang for shade;
- Corbusian window motif;
- assertive cantilever, and
- contrasting non-rectangular shape.

The following design features are of additional significance; the perimeter spaces including the courts and path, the clerestory glazing, the deep concrete fascia, and original detailing and finishes.

As well as normal "town" library functions, the building was designed to house community facilities, including information and referral services and facilities for community activities including a meeting room on the upper level. In 1982 the jury for the RAI ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion stated "It is a very human building; a building for people. It has a scale and personality that is totally in key with the needs of a community facility; it has succeeded in providing a setting where young and old can feel comfortable and sense that the building is part of their community."

The design solution has produced an exceptionally well-detailed sculptural building form in an urban context that was conceived as a stand-alone structure with small courtyards, and yet also to be viewed from a great distance across the park from the west. The library is an important civic building in a town centre sadly lacking good urban design decisions after the construction of the Cameron Offices was begun.

The library is well maintained and in excellent condition, although there appear to be some minor moisture damage stains.

In the ACT Chapter Awards jury report of 1982 when the Library was awarded the Canberra Medallion, the report stated "Whilst the building is restrained in its expression of form and space it is exquisite in its detailing and use of materials. The concrete work is very refined and the use of glass is masterful."

### **Background/History**

The Belconnen Library is one of a number of libraries Gibson has designed, including the libraries at the Universities of Queensland, 1973, and Griffith, 1975.

Gibson has described the Queensland University central Library as "a platform for books with a pre-cast concrete cover which has been articulated to externally express various internal functions". This description, apart from the pre-cast cover, could well be used to describe the Belconnen Library.

The library is Gibson's only commission for the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) and was designed during a period in Canberra's history when the NCDC were "commissioning buildings which would demonstrate the maturity of the city by an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments" **CT**

The library is relatively unaltered with minor partitioning extending into the general space.

The library is greatly valued by the community and library staff, evidenced by the numbers of people who take advantage of it and their comments.

Robin Gibson is an important Australian architect. Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor states that "at the end of the 1970s there were several disparate directions in Australian architecture. Mainstream modernism was represented in the work of Seidler and Gibson," Gibson won the competition for the design of the Queensland Art Gallery in 1973, and in 1975, along with the Queensland Department of Works, was responsible for the development of the entire south bank site of the integrated Cultural Centre including a Performing Arts Centre, Museum, and Art Gallery.

These buildings are constructed in off-white insitu concrete and aesthetically form a horizontal layered complex above terraced gardens along the Brisbane River. The Art Gallery was the first building to be built and was completed in the same year as the Belconnen Library, 1982.

Other notable buildings designed by Gibson include wheat silos at Pinkenba, 1969; the Mayne Hall, University of Queensland, 1973; Humanities, Administration and Library Building, Griffith University, 1975; Southern Electricity Authority Control Centre, Belmont, 1977;; Colonial Mutual Building, Brisbane, 1984;

Gibson was chosen to design the Queensland Pavilion at Expo '88.

Gibson attended the University of Queensland where Karl Langer was one of his lecturers: an Austrian architect who worked for the important modernist German architecture Peter Behrens prior to immigrating to Australia. From 1954-55 Gibson traveled and worked in England. Prior to starting his own architecture practice he worked in the firm of Theo Thyme and associates, with John Dalton, another important Queensland architect of the second half of the Twentieth Century.

Gibson established his own practice in 1956 and his early houses were flat roofed single storey cubiform buildings with stud framing and white painted timber cladding with courtyards and extensive use of sliding glazed doors, such as the Mocatta House, Brisbane, 1966. His first major project to gain recognition was the Kenmore Presbyterian Church, Brisbane, 1968.

Gibson's architecture practice was quite diverse in that it undertook a wide range of work including single residential, small retail, industrial and major commercial and civic projects. "They are

smoothly functioning, pleasant places dressed with an up-to-the-minute elegance that never verges on ostentation.”

Gibson was a mentor to important Australian architects such as Gabriel Poole.

Belconnen Library was awarded the RAI ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion in 1982, which is the highest award presented by the Chapter for architectural excellence to the best recent building.

Robin Gibson was awarded the RAI Gold Medal in 1989.

Comparisons with other Canberra examples of the Late Twentieth-Century International style buildings and the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist style are interesting because the comparison will probably be with both internationally and nationally significant buildings. The library can be compared with the nearby internationally significant Cameron Offices, the High Court of Australia, the National Gallery of Australia and the Canberra School of Music.

"These buildings had in common the display of structural materials and a certain heroic presence but their broader, ideological bases were often diverse. Illustrating polar positions are the social-urban construct of the Cameron Offices and the symbolic, sculptural monument of the High Court of Australia, both of which can be seen to have their roots in Brutalism and ultimately in (Le) Corbusier's concrete architecture." The library falls somewhere between the two ideological bases having both urban and symbolic bases although on a smaller scale.

The Belconnen Library can be compared and contrasted with the Dickson Library, 1969, designed by Enrico Taglietti. The Dickson Library is in the Organic style and displays free massing and complex angular geometry in contrast to the cubiform overall shape of the Belconnen Library. Both buildings incorporate horizontal roof planes, and strong horizontal fascias. They are both set in urban centers, however, the Dickson library is mostly surrounded by streets and parking while the Belconnen Library is set in a pedestrian setting adjacent to a civic park. Both libraries incorporate free and open internal planning with stacks placed away from the building perimeter to allow light filled sitting and reading areas along the perimeter, often using high-level glazing for private well lit work areas.

The library was built by Concrete Constructions (Canberra) Pty Ltd.

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### **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 Robin Gibson is apparent in the design of the Belconnen Library, 1982, which was innovative when compared with other public complexes built in Canberra. The Library is the only work of architecture in Canberra by the leading nationally significant architect Robin Gibson and was commissioned by the NCDC.

The design of the library demonstrates an important development in architectural style in the time of the NCDC: one of rationalist architecture in Canberra at that time.

The original interior design was significant: it provided an open plan solution, with separate areas for children and adults that related well to the exterior spaces. The upper level provides community facilities that have been designed in the same aesthetic as the library facilities.

The concrete work is of a very high standard, refined and well detailed exhibiting the equivalent of crafted workmanship in both the formwork, concrete pouring and bush-hammering; a quality rarely achieved in Canberra buildings.

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

The Belconnen Library is an excellent example of the combination of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its Cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, large sheets of glass, plain, smooth wall surface, and the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style (1960-) with its strong shapes boldly composed, expressed reinforced-concrete, large areas of blank wall and off-form concrete. It is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Robin Gibson.

The following design features are of additional significance; the perimeter spaces including the courts and path, the contrasting non-rectangular shapes, the clerestory and horizontal (Corbusian window motif) glazing, the deep concrete fascia overhanging for shade, assertive cantilevering, the bridging path over the entry, and original detailing and finishes.

The library is highly valued by the RAIAs as an excellent example of these styles of architecture by a leading nationally significant architect. It was awarded the RAIAs ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion 1982.

Robin Gibson is considered one of Australia's most important mainstream modernist architects of this period.

The library is greatly valued by the community.

*(iii) A place which demonstrates a distinct 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 design of the library demonstrates an important development in architectural style that has extended through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, by contrast with traditional architectural styles. Some of Australia's most important public buildings were built in this style in Canberra. Modern architecture was the most important architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It had as its origins the work of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. Modern architecture came relatively late to Australia, interrupted by WWII. Canberra is one of the few 20<sup>th</sup> Century designed cities in the world. The combination of modern architecture and urban design is of exceptional interest.

*(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 library is important for its strong association with Robin Gibson who played and still plays a significant role in Australia's cultural history. He is one of the most important architects to practice in Queensland and this is his only work in Canberra.

Robin Gibson was awarded the RAIAs Gold Medal in 1989.

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*(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 this building is a valuable educational resource for designers and planners. Its architecture is characteristic of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style and the Late Twentieth-Century Brutalist Style (1960-).

The architecture of this library may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural Styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories. This building is a very good example of the combination of the two styles. Its innovative planning contributes to its significance and educational heritage.

The Belconnen Library can be compared with the internationally significant Cameron Offices, the High Court of Australia, the National Gallery of Australia and the Canberra School of Music. "These buildings had in common the display of structural materials and a certain heroic presence but their broader, ideological bases were often diverse. Illustrating polar positions are the social-urban construct of the Cameron Offices and the symbolic, sculptural monument of the High Court of Australia, both of which can be seen to have their roots in Brutalism and ultimately in (Le) Corbusier's concrete architecture." The library falls somewhere between the two ideological bases having both urban and symbolic bases, although on a smaller scale.

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## References

To follow.

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## Other Information Sources