

Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter  
**Register of Significant Architecture**

**RSA No:** R135

**Name of Place:** St Joseph's Catholic Church

**Other/Former Names:**

**Address/Location:** 61 Boronia Drive O'CONNOR ACT 2911

Block 1      Section 78      of O'Connor

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	2016	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation Revision No:		Category:	Religious
Citation Revision Date:		Style:	Ecclesiastical

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Date of Design:	1971	Designer:	Kevin Curtin of Kevin J. Curtin & Partners
Construction	1972-3	Client/Owner/Lessee:	Rev. W. O'Shea P.P. of St Joseph's Parish
Restoration	2009	Builder:	

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

St Joseph's Catholic Church is a notable example of a building in the radical stream of church design of the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical Style (1960-). Indicators of the style are its circular plan-shape responding to liturgical changes and its emphatic verticality culminating in its tower and spire. The dramatic manipulation of shape and space demonstrated in the church is a characteristic of the style. The church exhibits high quality aesthetic characteristics due to its careful siting, shape and interior design, in particular the lighting, with stained glass, which provides a brilliant focus at the centre of the nave.

St Joseph's Catholic Church is the most outstanding building by the architect Kevin J. Curtin in Canberra. It has special associations with him, whose practice, Kevin J. Curtin & Partners, contributed much to Canberra's architecture, particularly its churches, church schools and clubs. Completed in 1973, it has a place in the history of the development of the ACT in the post Second World War period, as a prominent place of worship for people of the Catholic faith. The building is a significant architectural expression of the liturgy of the Catholic Church. It was designed to comply with a key element of the church's doctrine which arose from the second Vatican Council: a centralised sanctuary. This and the innovative design of the structure of the church demonstrate a high degree of creative achievement for the late twentieth century which compares well with religious buildings by the famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

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## Description

St Joseph's Catholic Church is on a site with a northern frontage along Boronia Drive, O'Connor, and is adjacent to St Joseph's Catholic Primary School and Convent. Other site boundaries are along Macarthur Avenue to the south and Hovea Street to the west. The circular building sits on a square platform, around which are uncoursed bluestone retaining and balustrade walls. Four wings, with walls and sloping buttresses of the same stonework, project beyond the circle towards the corners of the square. The main entrance is via the north-west narthex wing, on the centre-line the nave and sanctuary. On the south-east corner, behind the reredos of the sanctuary, are the sacristy and work sacristy. The church can also be entered via a porch on the north-east corner between rooms for the parish office and St Vincent de Paul. A porch on the south-west corner is a third entrance, between toilets and pairs of confessionals. The four walls of the nave between the wings consist of panels of stained glass.

The pitched roof of the church, clad in bronze-coloured ribbed steel decking, has four kite-shaped elements which slope up from the corners of the square to a square pyramidal tower surmounted by a tall metal cross. The roof over the narthex projects further than the other three roof elements, to provide a port-cochere. Glazing at the apex and narrow central panels on each side of the tower allow daylight into the centre of the church and through stained glass ceiling panels under the tower. Internally, the nave has pews facing the sanctuary, which is stepped up on two levels. On the upper level is the altar, well forward of the timber-screen reredos with carvings of the rosary and a raised central section with a carved wooden crucifix. A passage behind the reredos leads to the sacristies. On the lower level of the sanctuary are the font, pulpit and blessed sacrament. The stained glass panels flanking the sanctuary are predominantly blue on the east and red on the south. Within the eastern panel are two windows from Ireland, "The Annunciation and St Joseph" and "The Young Christ". The ceiling of the nave has timber boarding between the four stained glass walls and the tower, while grey painted plaster sheeting lines the remainder of the nave ceiling, reflecting the kite-shaped roof elements.

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## Condition

The church is well maintained in good condition since its restoration in 2009. The original light brown coloured steel roof was replaced in the restoration with bronze-coloured steel. The church is now protected by an Electronic System.<sup>i</sup>

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## Background/History

O'Connor is a north Canberra suburb developed soon after the Second World War, with a site for a Catholic church, convent and school.<sup>ii</sup> In 1955 the foundation stone for a primary school was laid.<sup>iii</sup> Sisters of St Joseph moved from Goulburn in January 1956 to staff the school,<sup>iv</sup> which was opened in May 1956.<sup>v</sup> By then, church services were being held in the convent school hall, described as St Joseph's, O'Connor, in the Parish of St Patrick, Braddon.<sup>vi</sup> Ten years later, it was one of only seven places for Catholics to attend church in Canberra.<sup>vii</sup> By 1968 St Joseph's was a separate parish and Father W. O'Shea was the parish priest.<sup>viii</sup>

With the growing congregation needing a new church, Father O'Shea engaged the architects and consulting engineers Kevin J. Curtin & Partners for the project. A design was produced in 1971 and documentation followed in 1972.<sup>ix</sup> Curtin seized the opportunity provided by the second Vatican Council's embrace of modern architectural design for Catholic churches following changes to liturgical practices.<sup>x</sup> In 1972 Harry Clarke Stained Glass Ltd, founded by Ireland's greatest stained glass artist, Harry Clarke (1899-1931) was commissioned by the NCDC to supply two windows, which were installed in 1973.<sup>xi</sup> Construction of the church was completed that year, funded by donations and the proceeds from a lottery won by parishioners.<sup>xii</sup>

A Parish Centre was built between the church and Boronia Drive in 1986, to a design by Munns Sly & Associates, with meeting and reading rooms.<sup>xiii</sup> Extensive damage to the church resulted from a fire lit by an arsonist in August 2007. Most of the roof was destroyed as the fire went up through the tower, which acted as a chimney, but the pews, stained glass and much of the artwork was left untouched. Kevin Curtin's original drawings were used to completely restore the church.<sup>xiv</sup> The restoration respected the original design and retained the fabric as much as possible. The adjacent Parish Centre, also much damaged by the fire, was demolished.<sup>xv</sup> After being closed for nearly two years, the church was reopened on the Feast Day of St Joseph, 19 March 2009.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Kevin J. Curtin FRAIA (1924-1996)

Kevin Joseph Curtin was born in Murrumburrah, NSW in 1924. His family moved to Queanbeyan, where Kevin and his twin brother Leo Patrick (known as Patrick) attended St Gregory's Primary School, then to Ainslie in 1940.<sup>xvii</sup> Kevin completed his education at Canberra High School, and became a clerk in the Public Service, as did Patrick. On turning 18 they enlisted in the RAAF in 1943 and served as navigators of Lancaster bombers over Germany. Patrick had vowed to pursue a career in architecture after the War, but was killed in action in 1945. Kevin returned to Australia determined to fulfil his brother's ambition.<sup>xviii</sup> He became an Associate of the RAIA in 1951, having completed a non-diploma course in architecture at Sydney Technical College,<sup>xix</sup> and established the Curtin and Cameron practice in Sydney 1953. He was so well regarded in the profession that he was a member of the jury for the Sulman Medal in 1954 and was made a Fellow in 1970.<sup>xx</sup>

Curtin's affiliation with the Catholic Church eventually led to commissions for more than 50 churches and over 200 schools. For these, he was awarded a Papal Medal.<sup>xxi</sup> He designed some remarkable churches, particularly St Bernard's, Botany (1954) said to be Australia's first church with a parabolic roof, reminiscent of the contemporary thin shell structures of the Mexican architect Felix Candela.<sup>xxii</sup> Other notable churches are St Monica's, North Parramatta (1960) with a nine-bay A-frame roof<sup>xxiii</sup> and Marist Brothers Chapel, Kogarah (1961), a two-storey circular chapel and assembly hall with a radiating pre-cast concrete folded-plate roof.<sup>xxiv</sup> By this time his practice was Kevin J. Curtin & Partners. He completed major hotels for the Federal Hotels chain, as well as the Wrest Point Convention Centre in Hobart and casinos in Darwin, Alice Springs and Launceston. His Civic developments in NSW included Broken Hill, Dubbo and Bankstown.<sup>xxv</sup>

When the Dominican Order in Australia resolved in 1960 to set up its headquarters in the Canberra suburb of Watson, the Irish architect and Dominican Father Bonaventure Leahy designed a complex with a Dominican Sisters Convent and teachers training college and a Dominican priests' house of theology.<sup>xxvi</sup> The concept included a parish church and a primary school. Kevin Curtin was engaged to collaborate with Father Leahy and building began in 1961.<sup>xxvii</sup> Kevin Curtin and Partners were the lighting and heating consultants for the house of theology.<sup>xxviii</sup> The convent and college opened in 1963, the Dominican Rosary School in 1964<sup>xxix</sup> and the house of theology in 1966.<sup>xxx</sup> In 1973 Curtin produced a fully-detailed design for a remarkable octagonal parish church for the Dominican Fathers with a ring of 16 concrete blade-spires, to be sited between Leahy's octagonal buildings. The Dominican house of studies moved back to Melbourne in 1974 and the project did not proceed. A less imaginative Holy Rosary Catholic Church (1977) was designed and built nearby of more affordable concrete blockwork by Civil and Civic Pty Ltd.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Curtin designed the Queanbeyan Leagues Club in 1963. This and other projects, such as Queanbeyan RSL Club and the Queanbeyan Bowling Club prompted him to open a Canberra branch of his Sydney-based practice in 1964.<sup>xxxii</sup> In that year Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic churches and a presbytery were designed for Jindabyne in the New South Wales Snowy Mountains.<sup>xxxiii</sup> St Columbkille's Catholic Church opened in 1966.<sup>xxxiv</sup> At the Australian National University, Curtin designed the John XXIII College and the Chapel of St John the Evangelist, the first chapel on the campus. They opened in 1969, the same year as Curtin's Yowani Country Club in Lyneham. Other clubs designed by Curtin include Canberra Southern Cross Club (1972) Canberra Royals Club (1975) and Queanbeyan Leagues Club Redevelopment (1975).<sup>xxxv</sup> His Macquarie Hotel was completed in Macquarie in 1970. Canberra schools designed by Curtin include Canberra Catholic Girls High School, now Merici College, Braddon (1959), St. John Vianney's Primary School, Warramanga (1971), St Matthew's Catholic Primary School, Page (1971), St Francis Xavier Catholic High School, Florey, (1976) and Padua Catholic High School, Wanniasa (1978).<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Perhaps Curtin's greatest legacies to Canberra are two remarkable churches, St Joseph's Catholic Church, O'Connor (1973) and, in association with Ernest Munns, Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Curtin (1975). A notable and prominent example of Curtin's architecture in Canberra is the former ACT TAB, now TransACT, brick office tower and annex on Northbourne Avenue, Dickson (1975-78).<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In July 1977 the architectural and engineering practice of Kevin J. Curtin and Partners Pty Ltd in Canberra was purchased by Ernest Munns and Robert Sly to become Munns, Sly and Associates Pty Ltd.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Sly was a newcomer, but Ernest Munns had managed Curtin's Canberra office for some time. Curtin's final project before retiring was the St Mary's Cathedral School, Cardinal and Priests' residence in Sydney (1992). He died in 1996, aged 71. His career had spanned four decades and included the design of an extraordinary range of buildings; notably church, civic, schools and hospitality architecture.<sup>xxxix</sup>

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### **The Design of St Joseph's Catholic Church and Comparable Buildings in Canberra: St John the Evangelist Chapel, Building 51, Daley Road, Australian National University and Holy Trinity Catholic Church, 3 Strangways Street, Curtin**

The churches Kevin Curtin designed before the mid 1960s, before the second Vatican Council (1962-5) introduced changes to the Mass of the Roman Rite usually had traditional rectangular plans. The decision of the Council regarding the planning of churches was that face-the-people orientation was to be made possible by having a centralised sanctuary. For masses to be celebrated with the priests facing the people, altars were to be built separate from walls, in such a way that it would be possible to walk around them easily.<sup>xl</sup>

The first opportunity in Canberra for Kevin Curtin to plan in this way came from the Dominican Fathers, for him to design **St John the Evangelist Chapel** at the ANU's John XXIII College. The neat chapel, designed in early 1967 and completed in 1969, broke away from the traditional rectangle with a square nave, entered

through a corner narthex. The congregation faces a free-standing altar in the sanctuary near the opposite corner. Daylight enters the nave via a central skylight under a squat spire, and through obscure glass walls each side of the entrance. A small side chapel, confessionals and sacristies complete the plan. Four triangular timber-boarded ceiling panels with extensive perimeter indirect lighting accentuate the square plan. The exterior, with manganese brick walls, concrete colonnades and a square hipped blue/black glazed tile roof blends well with its setting.<sup>xli</sup> Its interior form, albeit more modest and square rather than circular is, like that of St Joseph, based on geometry.

**St Joseph's Catholic Church** is a good example of a building in the radical stream of church design of the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical Style (1960-), due mainly to its circular plan-shape responding to liturgical changes, but also due to the emphasised verticality culminating in its tower and spire. In a most innovative way, Kevin Curtin solved the problem of roofing the building. As a result, the church has another characteristic of the style: the dramatic manipulation of shape and space. Internally, the circular nave is kept commendably free of potentially intrusive ancillary spaces by locating them in projecting wings. The generous sanctuary has allowed the altar to be located well towards the centre of the circle, close to the people. The arrangement of the nave ceiling to reflect the unusual roof shapes is particularly effective. A striking attribute of the interior is its stained glass, in four large wall panels and on the underside of the tower, where daylight is focussed brilliantly at the centre of the nave and on the altar. St Joseph's Catholic Church is the most outstanding building by the architect Kevin J. Curtin in Canberra.

**Holy Trinity Catholic Church** (1975) in Curtin, was designed by Kevin Curtin in 1971 in association with Ernest Munns,<sup>xlii</sup> concurrently with St Joseph's. It is another good example of the radical stream of church design of Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style (1960-), this time with cream brick external walls and glazed terra-cotta tiled roofing. The form is also based on geometry, but that of a triangular pyramid, with substantial smaller pyramids attached on each side. As the relationship of the smaller pyramids to the larger appears awkward, and the site is less open, the composition is not as successful externally as that of St Joseph's. The spatial quality of the interior is quite unusual. The entrance via the corner narthex leads down a central aisle to the sanctuary, located commendably near the congregation by virtue of generous transepts in the other two corners of the major triangle. There is no reredos – in its place is a triangular chapel behind the sanctuary. Here, and in the transepts, are narrow vertical windows for daylight, which also enters under the eaves and floods the interior through a central skylight. Two stained glass windows are by the notable artist David Saunders.<sup>xliii</sup> The smaller triangles each side of the narthex, housing the necessary ancillary spaces, are entered externally and slightly intrude into the triangular nave.<sup>xliiv</sup>

### **Comparisons with Religious Buildings by Frank Lloyd Wright**

Kevin Curtin was breaking away from traditional church design in 1971 in a similar way that the famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) had been for several decades. In his later years, Wright discovered that a hexagonal, diamond-shaped, or triangular module might work almost as well as a square one, and produce an infinitely greater variety of spaces. Curtin used a triangular module at Holy Trinity, Curtin, but the plan of St Joseph's, O'Connor is circular, a pattern which dominated Wright's architecture throughout his final years. The shape of its roof is comparable to the roofs of some of Wright's churches.<sup>xlv</sup>

Wright's Florida Southern College buildings from 1938 onwards, with their suggestion of folded planes, were part of his attempt to get away from boxlike architecture. The Annie Pfeiffer Chapel (1940) is a hexagonal structure with many surprising levels and an astonishing play of light from above. Also at the college, the William H. Danforth Chapel (1954-5) was designed by Wright with a prow-like front protected by a pointed roof projecting dramatically forward.<sup>xlvi</sup> The First Church of Christ Scientist, 4 Bligh Street, Barton (1963) by architects E.J. Scollay and A.P.M. Coble, is an interesting Canberra reminder of the William H. Danforth Chapel.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Wright developed the motif of a prow-like front with a folded roof in his Madison Unitarian Church (1947-51). In the auditorium he created a diamond-shaped space with a sense of enclosure, lit from various unexpected sources. The ceiling's graceful curves suggest, in Wright's words, "the wings of a bird in flight". The pews are arranged to allow parishioners to face each other as well as the minister, to enhance a sense of community. The lighting, ceiling shapes and pew arrangement all have similarities with St Joseph's. Externally, the roof is composed of origami-like folded planes, meant to represent hands raised in prayer, with a peak above the prow.<sup>xlviii</sup> The similarity to origami is apparent in the roof of St Joseph's. It projects dramatically in four directions, but to a greater extent over the entrance. Both churches have stone bases, integrating them with their sites. Curtin chose the same uncoursed bluestone he had seen at the Dominican centre at Watson.

The tower of St Joseph's can be compared with Wright's Beth Sholom Synagogue, Elkins Park, P.A. (1954-59).<sup>xlix</sup> Both allow daylight into the buildings.

## **ANALYSIS AGAINST THE HERCON CRITERIA ADOPTED IN THE ACT IN SEPTEMBER 2014:**

### **a. Importance in the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural or natural history**

St Joseph's Catholic Church, completed in 1973, has a place in the history of the development of the ACT in the post Second World War period, as a prominent place of worship for people of the Catholic faith.

### **c. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of ACT's cultural or natural history.**

St Joseph's Catholic Church has the potential to yield information about church planning and construction which can further an understanding of ACT's cultural history.

### **d. Importance in demonstrates the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects**

St Joseph's Catholic Church is a notable example of a building in the radical stream of church design of the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical Style (1960-). Indicators of the style are its circular plan-shape responding to liturgical changes and its emphatic verticality culminating in its tower and spire. The dramatic manipulation of shape and space demonstrated in the church is a characteristic of the style.

### **e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT.**

The church exhibits high quality aesthetic characteristics due to its careful siting, dramatic manipulation of shape and space and its interior design, in particular the lighting, with stained glass, which provides a brilliant focus at the centre of the nave.

### **f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period**

The building is a significant architectural expression of the liturgy of the Catholic Church. It was designed to comply with a key element of the church's doctrine which arose from the second Vatican Council: a centralised sanctuary. This and the innovative design of the structure of the church demonstrate a high degree of creative achievement for the late twentieth century which compares well with religious buildings by the famous American architect Frank Lloyd Wright. St Joseph's Catholic Church is the most outstanding building by the architect Kevin J. Curtin in Canberra.

### **h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history.**

The church has special associations with the architect Kevin J. Curtin FRAIA, whose practice, Kevin J. Curtin & Partners, contributed much to Canberra's architecture, particularly its churches, church schools and clubs.

## **REFERENCES AND END NOTES**

- Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds, *Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. Angus and Robertson 1989.
- *Works of Art in Canberra*, NCDC, 1980.
- Peter Blake, *Frank Lloyd Wright Architecture and Space*, Pelican, 1960.

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<sup>i</sup> Notice on church door.

<sup>ii</sup> Jim Gibbney, *Canberra 1913-1953*, AGPS 1988, p 250.

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- iii The Canberra Times, 19 September 1955, p 2
- iv The Canberra Times, 27 January 1956, p 2
- v The Canberra Times, 21 May 1956, p 2
- vi The Canberra Times, 24 March 1956, p 2
- vii The Canberra Times, 5 April, 1966, p 27
- viii The Canberra Times, 23 September, 1968, p 3
- ix Dates on copies of drawings of St Joseph's Parish Church on the building file supplied by ACT Archives.
- x Philip Goad, Churches, in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge U.P., 2012, p 144
- xi *Works of Art in Canberra*, NCDC, 1980, p 70 and Lucy Costigan and Michael Cullen, *Strange Genius, The Stained Glass of Harry Clarke*, The History Press Ireland, 2010.
- xii <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2009-03-19/canberra-church-rises-from-the-ashes/1624202>
- xiii Copy of drawing of St Joseph's Parish Centre on the building file supplied by ACT Archives.
- xiv *ibid.*
- xv J.D. Akhurst, *Canberra The National Capital of Australia*, 2008, p 67. Photo of the church after the fire but before restoration, showing the Parish Centre being demolished.
- xvi abc news, op cit.
- xvii Property and Tenancy Register for 66 Campbell Street, Ainslie, ACT Archives.
- xviii John Barnard, Obituary of Kevin Joseph Curtin, 1996 in <http://architectureau.com/articles/departures/> and War Records of Kevin Joseph Curtin and Leo Patrick Curtin, NAA barcodes 5374039 and 5373836.
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- xxiii University of Melbourne Faculty of Architecture, *Cross-Section*, No.102, April 1961.
- xxiv NLA Photographic image No. A1200:L40143
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- xxvii *Catholic Voice*, March 2013.
- xxviii The Canberra Times, 9 February 1966, p 20
- xxix J.R. Connor, *A Guide to Canberra Buildings*, A&R / RAI A, 1970.
- xxx [http://www.acu.edu.au/staff/campuses/canberra/campus\\_history](http://www.acu.edu.au/staff/campuses/canberra/campus_history)
- xxxi Copies of drawings on the Holy Rosary Catholic Church building file supplied by ACT Archives.
- xxxii The Canberra Times, 1 November 1963, p 32 and Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
- xxxiii The Canberra Times, 24 April 1963, p 26
- xxxiv <http://www.monaropioneers.com/jindabyne/st.colomkillies.htm>
- xxxv Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
- xxxvi The Canberra Times, 18 November 1974, p 3 and Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
- xxxvii The Canberra Times, 30 August 1975, p 3, and 26 June 1978, p 18
- xxxviii The Canberra Times, 9 July, 1977, p 24
- xxxix Barnard, op cit.
- xl [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Versus\\_populum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Versus_populum)
- xli <http://heritage.anu.edu.au/documents/heritage-values/inventory-by-building-number/51.-john-xxiii-final.pdf>
- xlii Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
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- xlv Peter Blake, *Frank Lloyd Wright Architecture and Space*, Pelican, 1960.
- xlvi *ibid.*
- xlvii The Canberra Times, 19 March, 1963, p 9
- xlviii Peter Blake, op cit.
- xliv [https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/jewishheritage/2008/beth\\_sholom\\_synagogue.htm](https://www.nps.gov/nr/feature/jewishheritage/2008/beth_sholom_synagogue.htm)