



Illustration 1: Allawah and Bega Courts, c 1957, prior to construction of Currong Flats. From postcard reproduced at www.canberrahouse.com.¹

FINAL

**ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURTS: SECTIONS 52 & 57 BRADDON
HERITAGE ASSESSMENT & IMPACT STATEMENT**

PREPARED FOR PURDON ASSOCIATES BY PHILIP LEESON ARCHITECTS
JUNE 2010

¹ www.canberrahouse.com

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ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURTS: SECTIONS 52 BRADDON & 7 REID HERITAGE ASSESSMENT & IMPACT STATEMENT

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE BRIEF

This heritage assessment has been prepared at the request of Purdon Associates, who, with Cox Humphries Moss Architects, are undertaking a planning study into the proposed redevelopment of Section 52 and 57, Braddon and Section 7, Reid (The Site) on behalf of the ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services.

As part of the planning study a Master Plan is being prepared. The Master Plan deals with Sections 52 and 57 Braddon. Allawah Court and the Currong Apartments are on Section 52, while the Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church leases Section 57. The Master Plan also deals with Section 7 Reid, which contains Bega Court.

The Master Plan proposes the demolition of Allawah Court, and the partial retention of Bega Court.² It is noted that both Allawah and Bega Courts have been nominated for inclusion on the ACT Heritage Register. Given the proposed use of The Site, an evaluation of the heritage significance of Allawah and Bega Courts is required.

It is intended that the evaluation will assist the above organisations in their preparation of the Master Plan, and will assist the ACT Heritage Council in its deliberation on the current Nomination of the Allawah and Bega Courts.

1.2 CONTENT OF THE REPORT

The review acknowledges two existing documents that deal with these buildings: Peter Freeman's June 2009 "Bega and Allawa Court, Sections 52 & 57 Braddon: Preliminary Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement", and the Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter) Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (RSTCA) citation for Allawah and Bega Courts.

² Peter Freeman, "Bega and Allawah Court, Sections 52 and 57 Braddon, Preliminary Heritage Assessment & Impact Statement", June 2009, Figure 6, Section 5 and footnote, 5:3, Figure 16: Master Plan.

Rather than repeating information already contained in the above documents, the report acknowledges their content, and attaches both documents as appendices to this report. In particular, attention is drawn to sections 1, 2 and 3 and 5 of the Freeman report. These sections cover general background and historical material such as current lessees and uses, authorship limitations and acknowledgements, current heritage recognition, early development at Braddon and Reid, development of the Civic area, and a description of the Master Plan for Sections 52 and 57, Braddon. It is noted that the content of the Master Plan considered in the Freeman report has changed. However, the broad intent of demolishing all of Allawah Court and retaining part of Bega Court still remains.

The purpose of this report is to introduce further historical and architectural information to assist with the examination of the significance of the Allawah and Bega Court buildings, and with the appraisal of the heritage impact assessment. This additional information includes a brief overview of medium density public housing built in Canberra during the 1950s, which allows the Allawah and Bega Court buildings to be positioned within a local context.

Following on from the above, the review examines the architectural design process for the Allawah and Bega Court buildings in some detail to determine the influences that may have informed their design. In doing so it attempts to establish the conceptual and formal relationship between these buildings and the International Style—the architectural style that both previous documents claim they are an example of.

1.3 AUTHORSHIP AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been prepared by Philip Leeson Architects. The following people assisted with the preparation of the report: Milton Cameron, David Hobbes, Philip Leeson and Marilyn Truscott.

2.0 HISTORY

2.1 MEDIUM DENSITY FLATS IN CANBERRA DURING THE 1940s and 1950s

Before and after the Allawah and Bega Courts were constructed, a number of medium density flats were built in the Federal Capital during the late 1940s and 1950s. Those completed before Allawah and Bega include the Griffith Flats (1948), the Braddon and Reid Flats (1951) and the Ainslie Flats (1952). Following Allawah and Bega, and in addition to the Northbourne Housing Precinct, were Gowrie Court in Narrabundah (1959), Lachlan Court in Barton (1959), and the Stuart Flats in Griffith (1959). It is considered that these flats were all well designed, and the only example that has been demolished is Lachlan Court.

All of these flats were the result of a desperate shortage of housing in the capital city during the early post-World War II years, when increasing numbers of public service administrative staff were transferred to Canberra. Government departments found it difficult to attract suitably skilled staff, as new recruits faced the prospect of spending many months in hostels, away from their families, until a rental house became available. To compound the problem, since World War II building costs had escalated dramatically, there were shortages of materials—which led to rationing arrangements—and a lack of tradesmen.³

After it became clear that the construction of single houses was not going to meet the growing waiting list for accommodation, alternative housing models were considered. The idea of constructing blocks of residential flats in key city locations found favour with the administration, and by 1948 the first of these, located on Canberra Avenue in Griffith, was completed. The Griffith Flats, as they became known, consisted of 48 two-bedroom units on a site bounded by Canberra Avenue, Eyre Street, Oxley Street and Dawes Street. The units were spread over eight separate two-storey blocks, each of which faced onto a road frontage. The central area between the blocks contained facilities for car parking and clothes drying.

³ Bruce Wright, *Cornerstone of the Capital: a history of public housing in Canberra* (Canberra: Australian Capital Territory Government, 2000), 25-27.

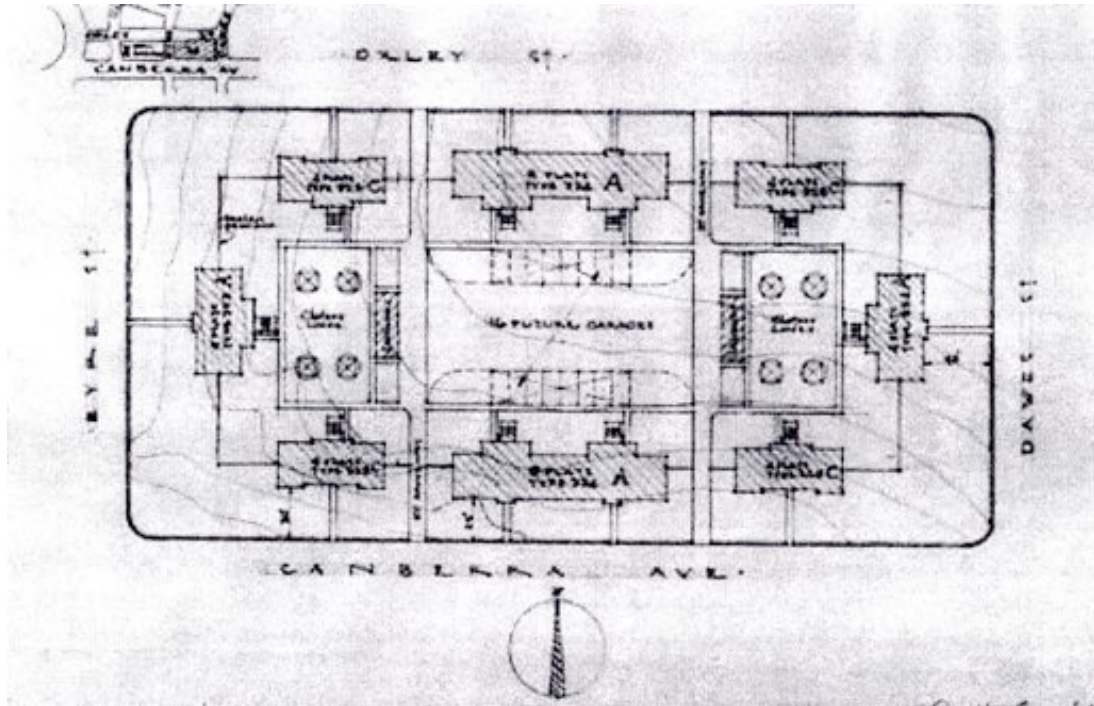


Illustration 2: Site plan, Griffith Flats, Department of Works and Housing, Canberra, 1947. National Archives of Australia, NAA: A2617, Section 30/16983.



Illustration 3: Griffith Flats. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010 .

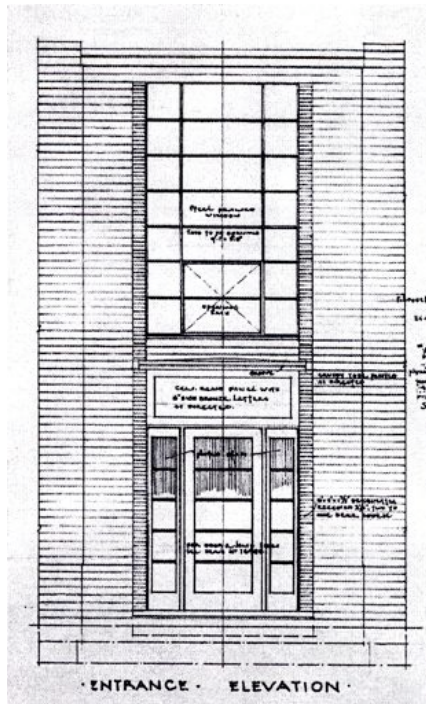


Illustration 4: Entrance elevation, Griffith Flats, Department of Works and Housing, Canberra, 1947. National Archives of Australia, NAA: A2617, Section 30/16987.

Soon after the Griffith Flats were completed, the Department began the design of two similar groups of flats to be built on either side of Ainslie Avenue. These became known as the Braddon Flats and the Reid Flats. The Braddon Flats, located on the northern side of Ainslie Avenue and facing onto Elimatta, Bateman and Gooreen Streets, consisted of 48 two-bedroom flats. The Reid Flats, directly opposite and facing onto Elimatta, Allambee and Gooreen Streets, comprised 20 one-bedroom units and 28 two-bedroom units. Both the Braddon and Reid Flats were completed in 1951.

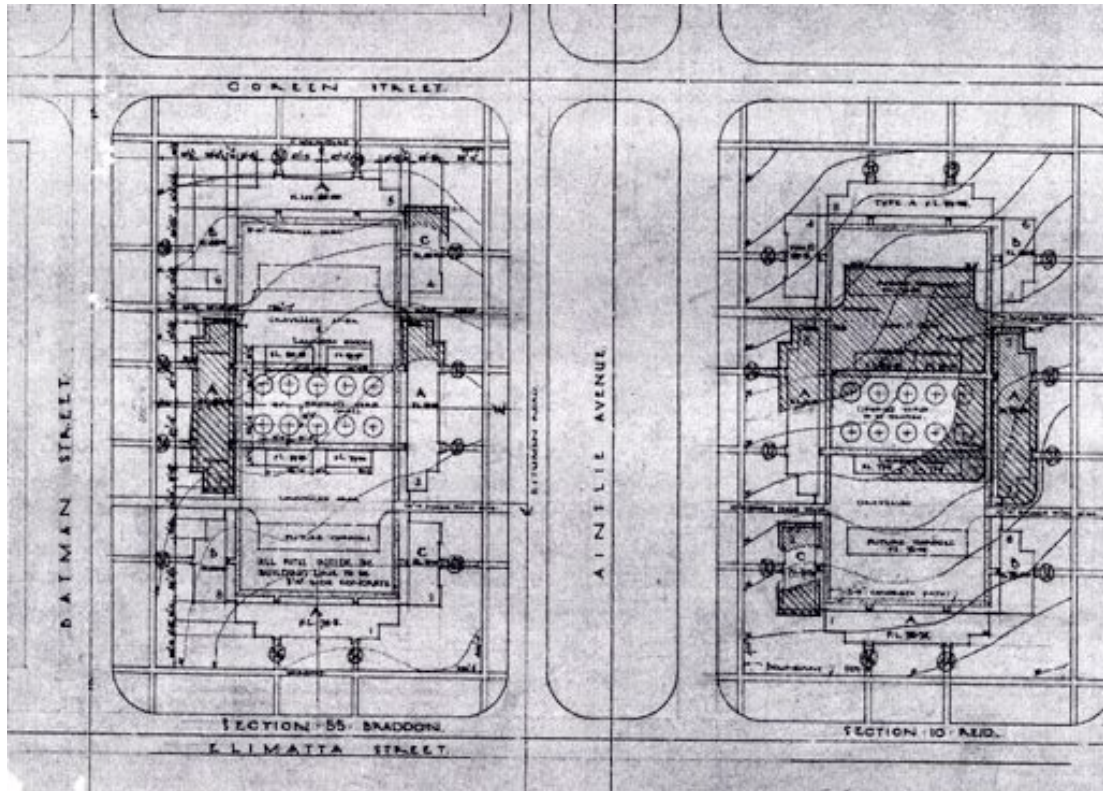


Illustration 5: Site plan, Braddon and Reid Flats, Department of Works and Housing, Canberra, c 1950. National Archives of Australia, NAA: A2617, Section 35/17517A.



Illustrations 6 & 7: Braddon and Reid Flats. Photos by Milton Cameron, 2010.

During following year, 1952, the Department completed the first stage of the Ainslie Flats. These consisted of 32 one-bedroom units and 56 two-bedroom units built around car parking and private amenity areas on a site in inner Ainslie, not far from the Braddon and Reid Flats.⁴

⁴ Wright, *Cornerstone of the Capital*, 29.

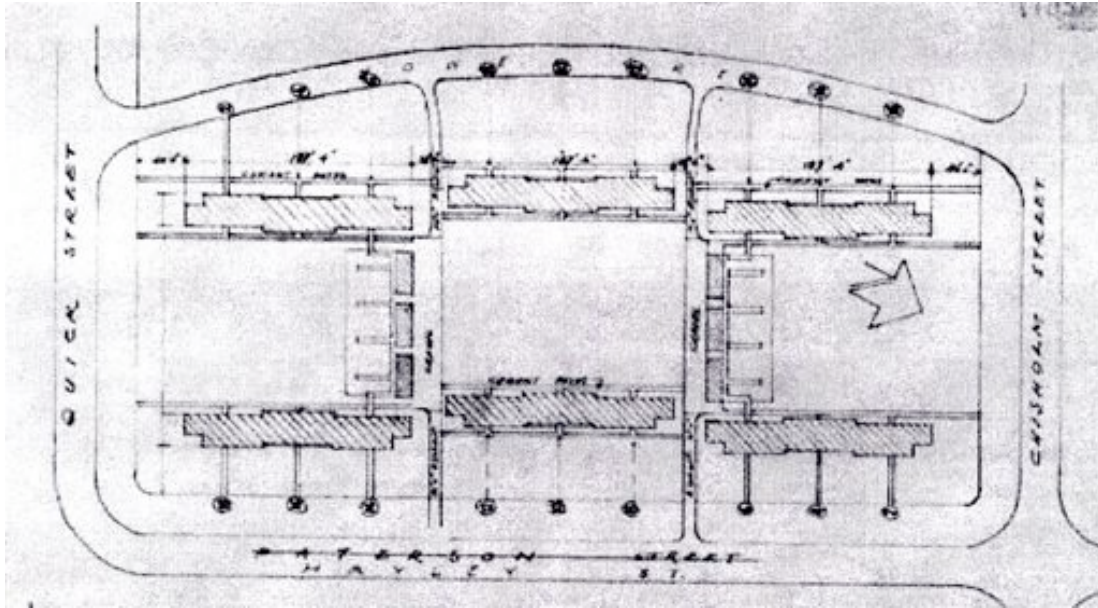


Illustration 8: Site plan, Ainslie Flats, Department of Works and Housing, Canberra, 1950. National Archives of Australia, NAA: A2617, Section 28/20041.



Illustrations 9 & 10: Ainslie Flats. Photos by Milton Cameron, 2010.

The Griffith, Braddon, Reid and Ainslie Flats were all variations of a similar theme. They all consisted of combinations of two-storey blocks that faced onto street frontages, regardless of solar orientation. Each block was rectangular in form, and contained one or two shared entrance porches—whose articulation was often the only variation in an otherwise planar wall surface. The rear of each block faced onto the central, shared communal area. Inside, the blocks contained a variety of modest, one-bedroom and two-bedroom units.

The building blocks that formed the flat complexes were all constructed of brickwork. In some cases this was left as face brickwork, while in other complexes—such as the Braddon and Reid Flats—it was rendered. Roofs were all tiled, the only variation being in the employment of hipped or gabled forms.

With the earliest of these flats—the Griffith Flats—being designed in the 1940s, it is not surprising that the design of these early Canberra flats was largely based on pre-World War II building types. Through all of these developments the influences of a reduced Inter-war Georgian Revival Style can be detected. This is evident in the overall restrained approach, and in the pitched roofs, simple, rectangular massing, regularly spaced window openings and symmetrically placed entrances. Although the rendered surfaces, symmetry and regular fenestration of the Braddon and Reid flats allude to the other popular inter-war Style in Australia—Mediterranean—the lack of any rounded arches or Mediterranean detailing makes this connection less apparent.

In keeping with the austerity of the post-war period, there were no elaborate details, classical mouldings, arches or shutters on these flat buildings. The entrances were, however, successfully emphasised and well integrated into the façade designs. (See Illustrations 2, 3 and 6.) All of these early flats make understated, but well-mannered, contributions to their local streetscapes. In style and architectural intent these early post-World War II Canberra flats were rational, simplified designs that owed much to the economic climate into which they were born. Designed to meet stringent cost and time restraints, their understated, reductive forms anticipated the modernist influenced architecture that was to appear in the later Allawah and Bega Court proposals.

Other medium density developments built after the Allawah and Bega Courts demonstrated shifts in design intent that were most likely informed by the Department of Works and Housing's experience on the Allawah, Bega and Currong developments.

Gowrie Court in Narrabundah, for instance, consisted of a series of separate, three-storey blocks that ran parallel with each other for optimum solar orientation. This was in contrast to the early 1950s flats that were two-storeys high, and flanked all four boundaries of their sites regardless of individual orientation. Other evidence of a more modern, International Style-influenced approach is exemplified by the very low pitch to the roof, accentuating the rectangular, cubistic form of the blocks. In another modernist tendency, the crisp, planar form is offset visually by the white-painted cantilevered balconies, which regularly punctuate the main façades.



Illustration 11: Gowrie Court. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.

It is considered that the Allawah and Bega Court buildings are not the only remnant examples of well-designed medium density housing from the 1950s in Canberra. All of the above flats, except for the demolished Lachlan Court in Barton, are still standing. All were, in the opinion of the writer, well-designed examples of their type.

2.2 DESIGN HISTORY OF THE ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURTS

Because of the high level of scrutiny that the National Capital Planning and Development Committee (1938-1957) applied to all aspects of the Allawah and Bega Court Buildings, together with the Currong Apartments, it is clear that this was considered to be a significant undertaking. This appears to have been due to the larger scale, higher density and prominent location of the residential flat development.

By early 1953, with the Braddon, Reid and Ainslie Flats completed, the Committee began discussing the question of increased residential density in Canberra, and reinvestigated earlier proposals for flats to be located on suitable sites near existing shopping areas. The concept of combining Sections 43 and 52 Braddon, sites that were in close

proximity to the Braddon and Reid Flats was proposed, and the Department of Works began to prepare design proposals for this location.⁵

In April 1953 Mr. Taylor, Director of Works, and Mr. Miller, Principal Architect, Department of Works, presented a sketch proposal for flats on the above site to the Committee. The sketches showed a series of staggered flats that fringed the perimeter of the site. The flat units were similar in area to those at Reid and Ainslie, but the blocks were three stories high, resulting in a higher overall density. But Committee members expressed reservations about the proposal. They were particularly concerned about the size and impact of the design in that location. They believed that a housing project “on such a prominent and important site was such that it should receive every possible attention and serious study aimed at producing a building scheme which would not only provide essential accommodation but would also make a definite contribution to the architecture of Canberra.”

Committee members added that this proposal was too important to be rushed through, and that the current design lacked cohesion and was not acceptable. They believed that there was “unlimited scope for a greatly improved architectural grouping and better land usage, and the provision of an interesting terminating vista feature.” They proposed the idea of holding an architectural competition for the design of flats on the site, recommending to the Minister of the Department of the Interior the “desirability of holding an architectural competition for the layout of the site and design of the essential buildings”, as “there were many architects in Australia with extensive experience in the particular field of flat design.” But they went further, recommending that the competition “should be open to all architects registered in the Commonwealth.” Amongst the guidelines suggested by the Committee were stipulations that habitable areas should be limited to three storeys in height, and that the flats were to be “economical living units—not luxury flats”.⁶

Taylor explained that shortages of staff within his Department had led to a situation where it had not been possible to give the design the serious consideration that it deserved. He could see no problem with the idea of a competition, and would discuss that option further. He would also see if an alternative sketch plan could be prepared.

⁵ Extract from Minutes of the 117th Meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, Canberra, 4.2.53 and 5.2.53.

⁶ Extract from Minutes of the 119th Meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, Canberra, 8.4.53 and 9.4.53.

To facilitate a major residential development on this site, steps were taken to close Batman Street between Cooyong and Currong Streets, and to reduce Moran Street to a pedestrian way.⁷

But by June 1953 it was apparent that an architectural competition for the design of flats on the site was unlikely to proceed, and the Department of Works was rushing to prepare a revised design.⁸ John Overall, Chief Government Architect in the Department, had taken control of the project, and confidently declared that his organisation possessed the architectural resources required to develop design proposals for the site in a relatively short timeframe.

At the July 1953 meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee Overall, Overall, design architect Richard Ure and Mr. Miller made a very comprehensive presentation of what were then known as the “Braddon Flats”. Taking turns, they presented three alternative sketch proposals (titled schemes “A”, “B”, and “C”), that had been prepared by Departmental architects in Sydney in collaboration with the Canberra office. The sketch designs, submitted in bound form, contained site locality and contour plans, a general layout plan, elevations, an aerial perspective, a variety of flat layout plans, and external and internal perspectives. The drawings were supplemented by supplementary data such as site analyses, accommodation schedules and a “Direct Insolation Analysis”, which claimed to indicate the hours of direct sunlight that would be obtained by habitable rooms at different times of the year.

⁷ NCPDC minute 21.4.53. Please refer to “Early Development at Braddon and Reid” in the Freeman report, particularly Figure 8, Section 3.

⁸ Extract from Minutes of the 121st Meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, Canberra, 10.6.53 and 11.6.53.

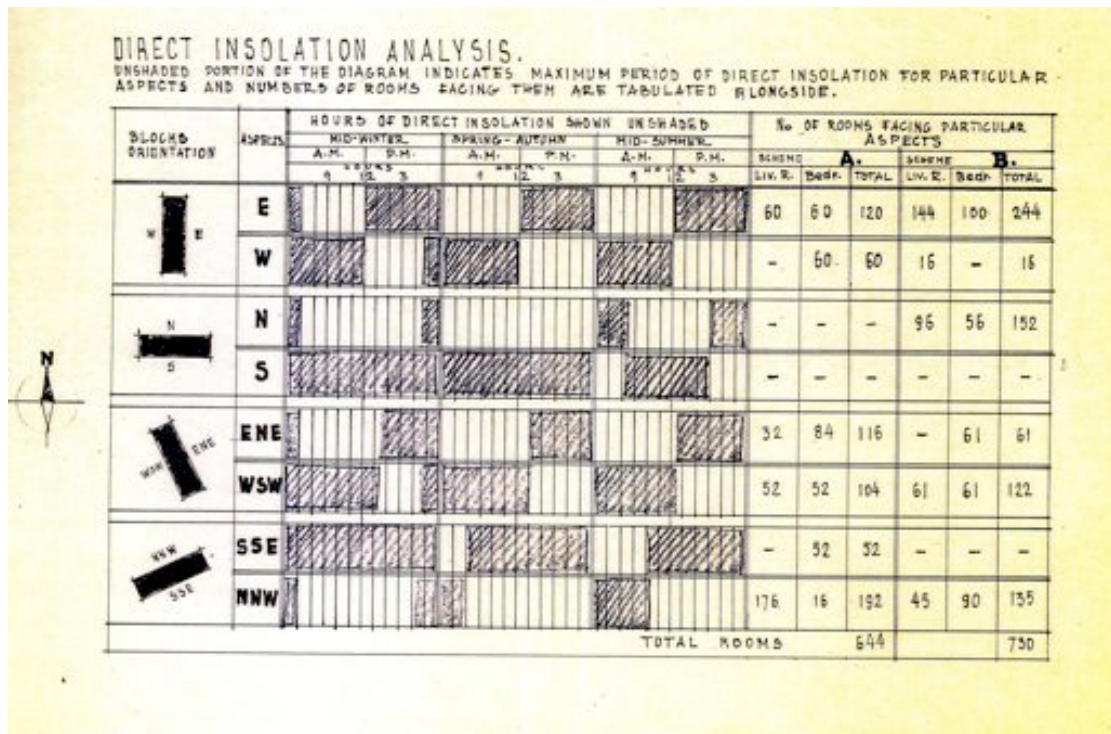


Illustration 12: "Direct Insolation Analysis", Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953.

It was an impressive presentation, particularly given the short amount of time available to prepare the designs and documentation. The Department had considered the required site density, and had concluded that the required high level could not be achieved through the construction of three storey blocks only. As a result, the proposals contained a combination of three-storey blocks (with stair access to all flats), and multi-storey units up to eight storeys in height (with lift access). The accommodation proposed for the higher blocks was intended to be bed-sitting room types, designed principally for single occupants who were currently living in hostels.

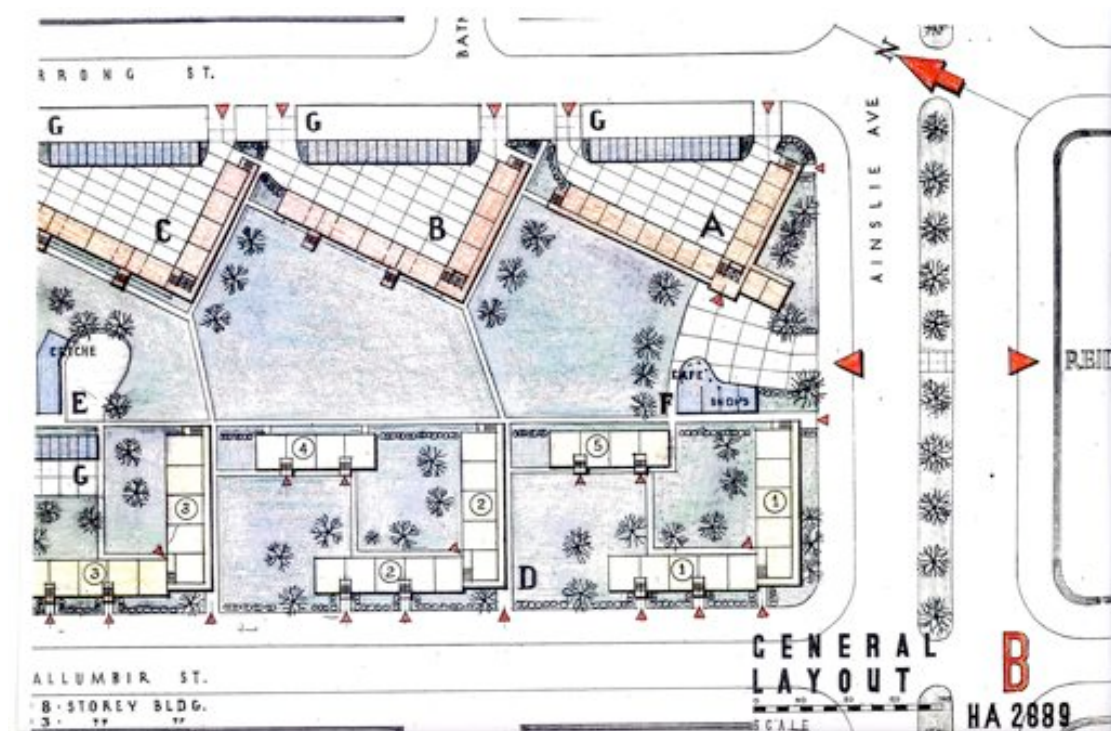


Illustration 13: scheme “B” site plan, Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953. The proposed café and shops were later deleted because of the proximity to the city. The view of the eight-storey flats from the end of Batman Street (top of picture) had some Committee members concerned.

During the presentation Overall declared his preference for scheme “B”, which placed the three-storey blocks along Cooyong Street, with the eight-storey blocks set back from Currong Street. He felt that this scheme would be “an attractive addition to the architecture of Canberra”. Overall and his colleagues promoted the benefits of developing Section 7 Reid—just across Ainslie Avenue—with similar residential flats at a later stage to create a “balanced development”. This is demonstrated by the symmetrical building forms depicted in the following two illustrations.



Illustration 14: scheme "B" locality plan and elevations, Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953. Note the original proposal to develop Section 7 Reid to create a "balanced" composition of eight-storey flats on the opposite side of Ainslie Avenue.



Illustration 15: scheme "B" perspective sketch, Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953. The block on the right was not built in that form.

After some discussion, the Committee agreed with Overall that scheme “B” was the most satisfactory solution, and resolved that this proposal be adopted as the basis for further design development. Items that the Committee decided required further investigation included the elimination of shops and a crèche⁹ from the scheme due to the close proximity of nearby commercial development, provision of what they termed a “vista feature” at the termination of Batman Street (from where the eight-storey blocks would be seen), and the screening of garages.

In spite of their earlier preference for an architectural competition for the design of the housing precinct—and the idea that international architects should be invited—some members of the Committee began to exhibit conservative views when it came to details of the Department’s design proposal. For instance, they expressed a preference for less glass throughout the development. In response, Ure explained that the large areas of glass indicated on the plans would need to be reconsidered anyway, due to the tight budgetary restrictions. One member of the Committee—Mr. Harris—expressed his concern regarding the possible reaction of Ainslie residents when they saw “such a high screen of buildings (8 storeys) was erected across the block”. The other members saw no reason to go back on their decision to approve the proposal, but thought that it might be advantageous to stage the project into separate blocks, with Block “A” being built first, followed by Block “C” and finally Block “B” (see Illustration 16 below).¹⁰

⁹ The NCPDC minutes refer to “deletion of crèche and shops”, while General Layout Plan HA 2889 shows a café and shops. *See Illustration ??*

¹⁰ Extract from Minutes of the 122nd Meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, Canberra, 8.7.53 and 9.7.53.



Illustration 16: scheme “B” aerial perspective, Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953. In regard to the eight-storey blocks, it was proposed to build Block “A” first, followed by “C” and finally “B”.

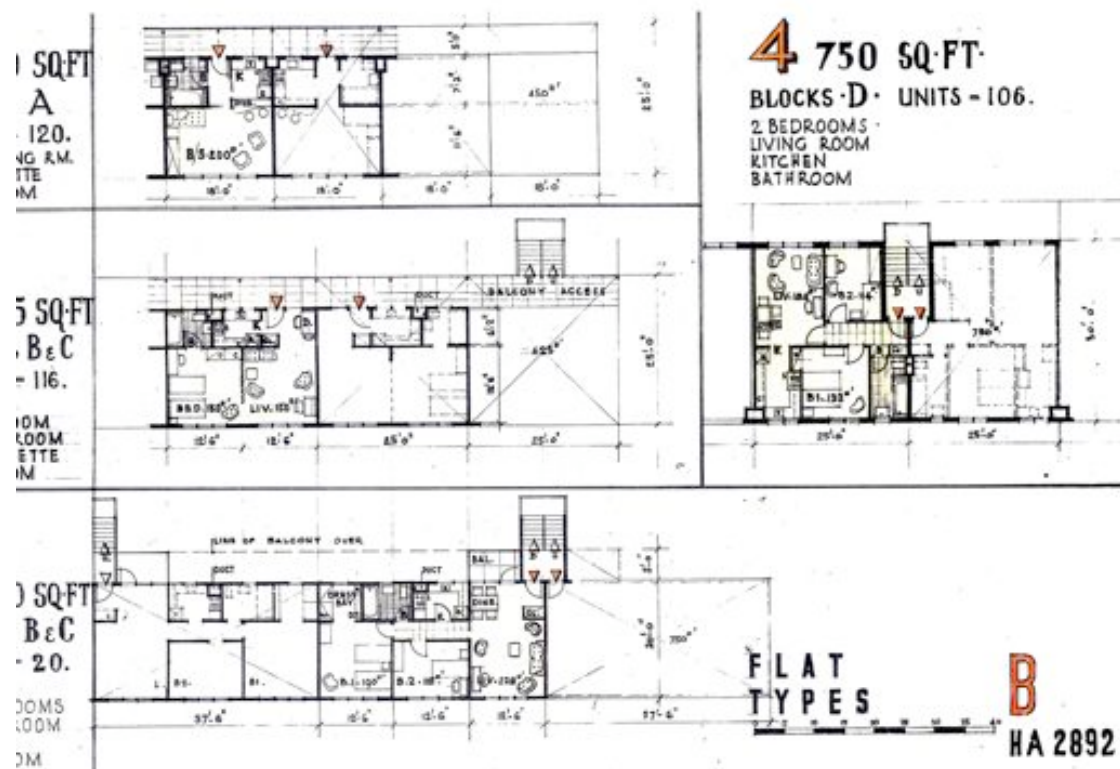


Illustration 17: scheme “B” flat types, Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953.

The proposal that was presented to the Committee in July 1953 was a large, ambitious undertaking in terms of the amount of residential accommodation that it would provide. The development was staged over a period of three years. The portion on Section 52 Braddon was developed first, and in September 1954 a tender was accepted for the construction of eight blocks of three-storey flats, containing 114 two-bedroom flats, on that site. These flats, completed in 1956, became known as Allawah Court.¹¹ In 1957 a similar series of three-storey flats, containing 114 two-bedroom flats, was completed on the Reid site in lieu of the high-rise proposal that had been presented to the National Capital Planning and Development Committee in July 1953. These became known as Bega Court.

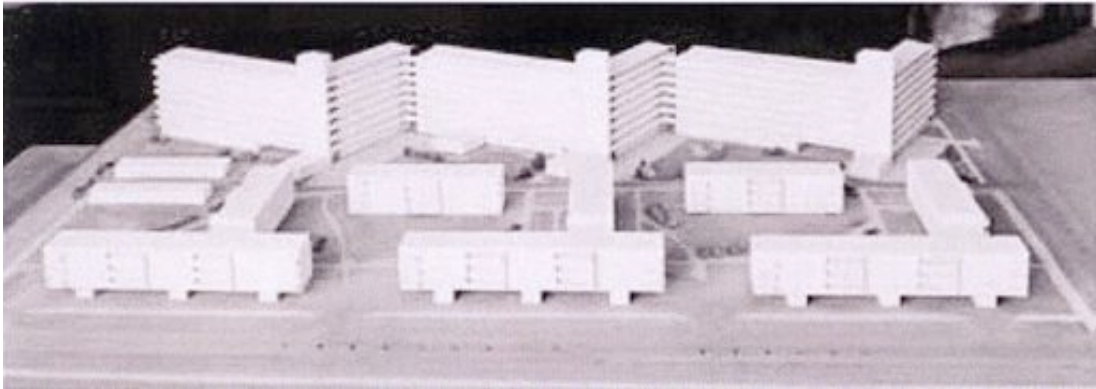


Illustration 18: model of Allawah Court and Currong Apartments, Department of Works, 1955.¹²

¹¹ Extract from Minutes of the 134th Meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, Canberra, 6.10.54 and 7.10.54.

¹² Reproduced from Freeman report. NAA: A7973, INT450/3.



Illustration 19: Allawa and Bega Courts, c 1957, prior to construction of Currong Flats. From postcard reproduced on www.canberrahouse.com.¹³

In 1957 Overall was appointed Commissioner of the newly established National Capital Development Committee (NCDC) in Canberra, and in the 1959 the eight-storey units on the Currong Street frontage of Section 52 Braddon were completed. Known as the Currong Flats, they contained 184 one-bedroom units and 28 two-bedroom units.

The accommodation provided by the Allawah, Bega and Currong developments combined came to a total of 184 one-bedroom flats and 256 two-bedroom flats. The largest post-World War II housing projects in Canberra before that were the 1951 Braddon and Reid Flats, on opposite sides of Ainslie Avenue. These contained a combined total of 20 one-bedroom flats and 76 two-bedroom flats. The Ainslie Flats of the following year contained 32 one-bedroom flats and 56 two-bedroom flats.

The Freeman report is therefore correct in stating that the Allawah and Bega Courts, and the Currong Flats, “represented the first major housing project in the Federal Capital since the Federal Capital Commission type houses and precinctual developments of the late 1920s”.

¹³ www.canberrahouse.com



Illustration 20: Currong Apartments. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.

2.3 THE ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURTS AND “POST-WAR INTERNATIONAL STYLE DESIGN”

It has been established that the Allawah and Bega Courts (together with the Northbourne Housing Precinct), are the principal remnant examples of medium density housing, demonstrating influences of International Style architecture, that were built in the Federal Capital during the 1950s. So in that regard this review concurs with the Freeman statement that, within the Canberra context, they are an “early example of Post-War International Style design”.

Like most building projects, the designs of these flats were modified throughout the developed design and documentation phases, and the finished buildings were significantly different to those depicted in the preliminary sketch plans. But at no stage of their design development—from sketch design through to documentation and construction—is it considered that the Allawah or Bega Courts exhibited what could be termed “outstanding design or aesthetic qualities”. Nor is it believed that they are an “excellent example of Post-War International Style design”. Instead, these buildings were designed by the Department of Works, with limited resources, in response to

limited budgets and short timeframes. They were conceived upon the conceptual foundations of previous flats designed by the Department of Works. Building upon that, they contain ideas and formal devices that reflect some aspects of International Style thinking. These International Style references, however, are limited. They are also incremental and workmanlike, representing a gradual shift away from previous methodologies rather than the adoption of radical modernist design ideals.

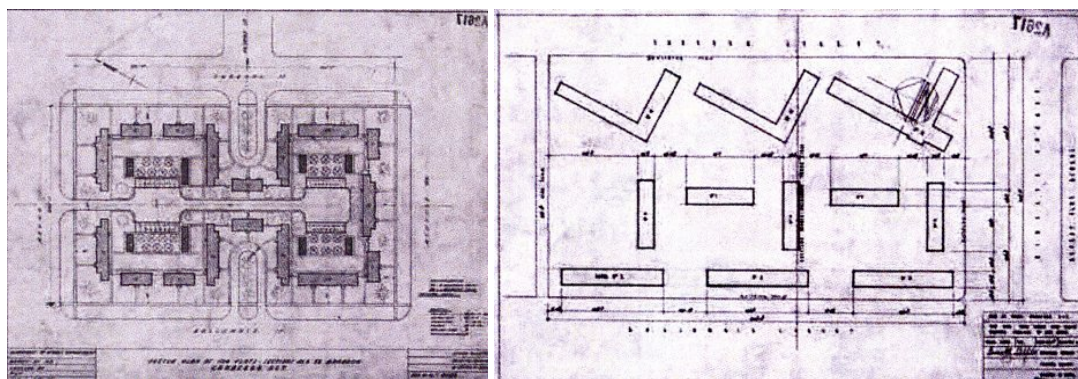
What “Post-war International Style design” means exactly is open to interpretation, so some clarification is required. As Kenneth Frampton noted, the International Style was, in many ways, “little more than a convenient phrase denoting a cubistic mode of architecture which had spread throughout the developed world by the time of the Second World War. Its apparent homogeneity was deceptive, since its stripped planar form was subtly inflected so as to respond to different climatic and cultural conditions”. Frampton described how the International Style, although it “never became truly universal”, implied a kind of universal approach to architectural design and construction that favoured certain elements or systems: lightweight technique, synthetic modern materials, standardised modular components, flexible free plans and skeleton frames instead of masonry.¹⁴

The need to find an appropriate architecture for this large commission, and important location, was a challenge for the Department of Works architects. It was a challenge that provided the design team, headed by Ure, with an opportunity to shift away from architectural styles that the Department had previously employed on housing projects, and to experiment with elements and concepts of International Style design and constructional techniques.

The way in which the sixteen separate building blocks that constitute Allawah and Bega Courts were placed on their sites reveals a conceptual shift towards modernist site planning technique. Earlier Department of Works flat developments in Canberra were based upon a symmetrical, formal planning formula whereby the blocks were always placed around the perimeter of the site, facing the streets, to create one large internal space. While the initial design proposal for Allawah Court comprised three “L”-shaped blocks and three rectangular blocks, the “L”-shaped blocks were separated in the design development stage. This resulted in a site layout that reveals an alternative approach to

¹⁴ Kenneth Frampton, “The International Style: theme and variations 1925-65”, *Modern Architecture: a Critical History*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980, this edition 1996), 248-49.

composing urban space, where the blocks are separated from each other, and do not align. This creates a more open and informal site pattern, or “figure-ground” composition. With Allawah Court, three separate blocks run parallel to Cooyong Street, while three other “secondary” blocks run at right angles to these. These secondary blocks are offset from the Cooyong Street blocks (ie. the ends do not line through). Two other blocks to the rear of the site (next to Currong Apartments), also run parallel to Cooyong Street, but are staggered so that they also do not line through. The end result is a freer site plan, and a series of semi-enclosed courtyard spaces whose open corners imply diagonal movement across the space.



Illustrations 21 & 22: Early site plan and final site plan, Section 52 Braddon (Allawah Court), Department of Works Note the difference between the formality of the first proposal on the left, with its similarities to earlier 1950s Canberra flats, with the more modernist version shown on the right.¹⁵

If the architectural details of the Allawah and Bega Courts are considered in regard to Frampton’s criteria for International Style architecture, there are certainly some areas of correlation. While the structural frame is expressed in some buildings of the Northbourne Housing Precinct in Dickson and Lyneham, this is not the case in Allawah and Bega Courts. But the precast concrete walls could be described as examples of standardised, modular components. The pitched roofs of the earlier post-war flats had disappeared and were replaced by flat versions, adding to the effect of cubistic, platonic forms with planar surfaces. Contrasting with these planar surface are cubistic balconies that regularly break through the facades and cantilever outward, creating an abstract, sculptural pattern.

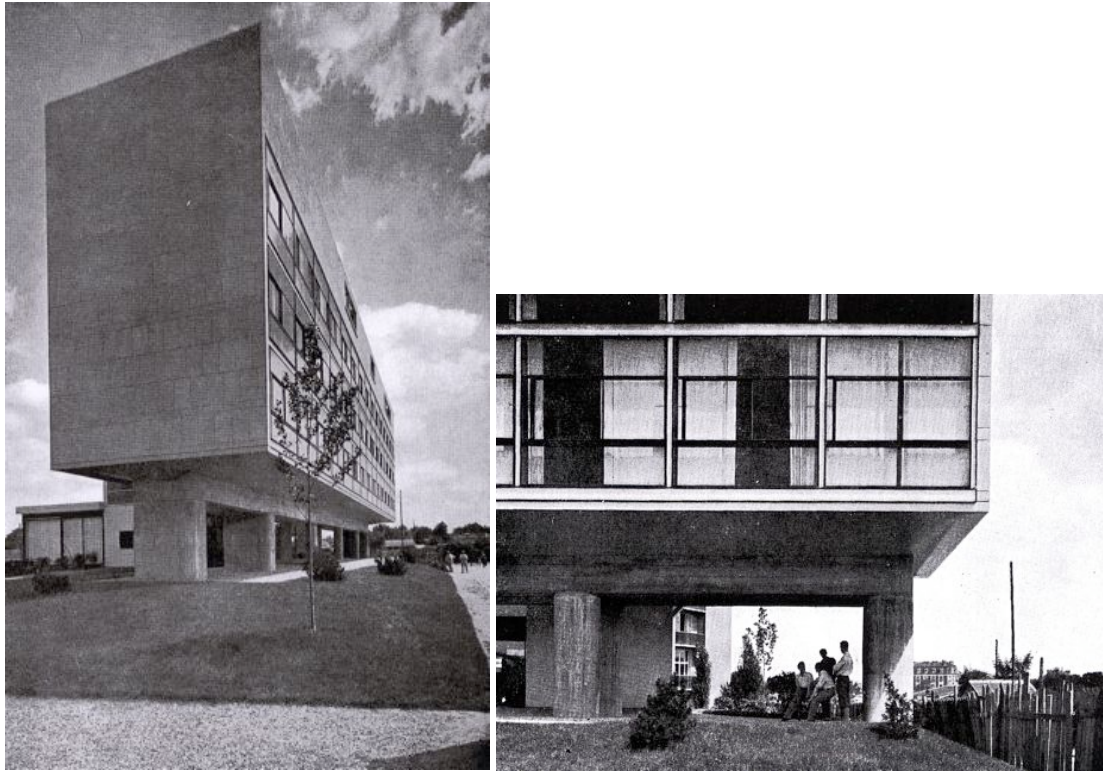
¹⁵ Reproduced from Freeman report. NAA: A2617, 7697975, NAA: A2617, 7697979.



Illustrations 23 & 24: Allawah Court, early sketch and recent photo showing use of balconies as formal compositional devices. Scheme 'B' perspective sketch, Braddon Flats, Canberra. Department of Works, 1953. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.

Further emphasising the impression of cubistic forms is the fact that the blocks running along Cooyong Street, raised above the ground on columns, appear to follow one of Le Corbusier's "five points for a new architecture". "Pilotis", or reinforced concrete columns, were a favourite device of Le Corbusier. They allowed the lower floor of the structure to be raised up to first floor level, creating a space below that Le Corbusier saw as a continuation of open space: "The house is in the air, above the ground; the garden passes under the house..."¹⁶

¹⁶ W. Boesiger, H. Girsberger, *Le Corbusier 1910-65* (New York, Praeger, 1967), 44.



Illustrations 25 & 26: Le Corbusier, Pavillion Suisse, Paris, 1930-32.¹⁷

But although there are similarities in appearance, the intent at Allawah and Bega Courts seems to be quite different to that proposed by Le Corbusier's employment of the pilotis. It appears that the Departmental architects simply raised these blocks up to address the natural fall across the site, allowing the ground floors of the Cooyong Street blocks to be approximately level with that of the blocks behind, and creating car parking spaces below.

¹⁷ Boesiger, Girsberger, *Le Corbusier 1910-65*, 111,112.



Illustration 27: Allawah Court from north-west. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.

Le Corbusier's notion of allowing space to flow beneath the building is further compromised by the batter wall that runs along the north-eastern perimeter of the Cooyong Street blocks, and by the wall built along the street boundary (see photos below). While Le Corbusier sometimes placed car parks in the space below the building, it was still seen as open space that flowed continuously under the building. In the Allawah and Bega Courts both of these wall elements succeed in blocking the flow of space, and of views, through the site.



Illustrations 28 & 29: Allawah Court, batter wall on left, Ballumbir Street wall on right. Photos by Milton Cameron, 2010.

There is little evidence within the architectural fabric of the Allawah and Bega Court buildings to support Frampton's theory that the potential universality of International Style design lay within the ability of its stripped, planar form to be subtly inflected in order to respond to different climatic conditions. In fact, with the exception of recessed balconies (which required metal louvres and other, more improvised, sun control devices to be added later), there is little inflection of the building envelope to moderate solar ingress.



Illustration 30: Allawah Court, showing various measures adopted by residents to protect from the sun

and to provide security. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.



Illustration 31: Allawah Court, showing measures adopted by residents to protect from the sun. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.



Illustration 32: Bega Court, showing measures adopted by residents to obtain privacy and protect from the sun. Photo by Milton Cameron, 2010.

While there is a clear distinction between the solid, masonry construction of the end walls and the semi-glazed longitudinal walls, because the blocks are set at ninety degrees to each other they face a variety of orientations—north-west, north-east, south-west and south-east. On many of these elevations, square windows set flush to the wall surface, with no sun-screening, face the bright Canberra sun at various times of the day. It is clear that, in spite of the Department’s “Direct Insolation Analysis” which they presented with their sketch plans to the Commission in July 1953, climatic considerations were not primary considerations when it came to the detailed design of blocks and individual flats.



Illustrations 33 & 34: Allawah Court, flush-mounted square windows to south-west, north-west (partly obscured by trees) and north-east elevations, retro-fitted metal louvres to balconies. Photos by Milton Cameron, 2010.

In spite of the best intentions, and the importance that the Committee and Department attached to this housing scheme, the architectural quality of these buildings was limited by a number of factors throughout the design process. These factors include the initial decision that the flats would be designed within the Department of Works rather than opened up to an architectural competition, the pressure under which the Department, with limited resources, was required to plan this project, and the imposition of strict budget restrictions. In some instances, the conservative nature of the Committee itself appeared to be a limiting factor. This latter fact is exemplified by the fact that the original drawings depicted large expanses of glass, indicating an initial preference for lightweight construction techniques—although, as established earlier, the amount of glass was reduced significantly at the request of the Committee. The results of this can be seen when the perspective sketch (Illustration 15), is compared with the completed buildings, where the largest expanses of glass that were retained in the design are to the stairwells.

Some of the principal ways in which the Allawah and Bega Courts display visual connections to International Style design—the pure, prismatic nature of the cubistic, rectangular building blocks as shown in the photograph below taken shortly after completion—have been lost through the addition of many other later building elements. A series of brick walls and pillars, steel fences and gates, pergolas, metal louvers, etc. have been added to the buildings and courtyards during the intervening decades. While the practical requirements of these works are not questioned, they do compromise the design integrity of the original concept. And while this work is, theoretically, “reversible”—that is, if money is spent, these later additions can be removed and the buildings returned to their original state—the practical requirements of privacy, shelter

and security that led to these material interventions still remain and would need to be resolved by other means, which may require intervention of another form.



Illustration 35: Allawah and Bega Courts, c 1957, showing prismatic purity of original buildings prior to later additions. www.canberrahouse.com ¹⁸



Illustrations 36 & 37: Allawah Courts showing later additions of walls, fences, gates, pergolas and improvised sun-screening and safety devices. Photos by Milton Cameron, 2010.

¹⁸ www.canberrahouse.com



Illustrations 38 & 39: Allawah Courts showing later additions of walls, fences, gates, pergolas and improvised sun-screening and safety devices. Photos by Milton Cameron, 2010.

For all of the above reasons, it is considered that the Allawah and Bega Court buildings are a good example of buildings that were influenced by International Style design concepts. This finding is in accordance with the Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (RSTCA) citation for Allawah and Bega Courts, which states that “The Allawah and Bega Courts complex of buildings [dating from 1954] is a good example of Post-War International style design.¹⁹

¹⁹ Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter), “Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture” (RSTCA), citation for Allawah and Bega Courts. RSTCA No: R106.

3.0 ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Assessment of Significance was prepared utilising the criteria established by the ACT Heritage Act 2004. The Assessment combines the research and findings of this report with information contained in the previous two documents that deal with the Allawah and Bega Courts—Peter Freeman’s June 2009 “Bega and Allawa Court, Sections 52 & 57 Braddon: Preliminary Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement”, and the Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter) Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (RSTCA) citation for Allawah and Bega Courts.

[a] It demonstrates a high degree of technical or creative achievement [or both], by showing qualities of innovation, discovery, invention or an exceptionally fine level of application of existing techniques or approaches.

Based upon the findings of Section 2 above, it is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[b] It exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or cultural group.

Based upon the findings of Section 2 above, it is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[c] It is important as evidence of a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function that is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost or is of exceptional interest.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[d] It is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations.

An assessment based on community associations with the site and its meanings to the community is currently being undertaken, with the results pending.

[e] It is significant to the ACT because of its importance as part of local Aboriginal tradition.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[f] It is a rare or unique example of its kind, or is rare or unique in its relative intactness.

[The following response is a modified version of that contained in the Freeman report of 2009]:

The Allawah and Bega Courts, together with the Northbourne Housing Precinct of 1959 to 1962, [designed by Ancher, Mortlock and Murray for the NCDC], are the principal remnant examples of medium density housing, demonstrating influences of International Style architecture, that were built in the Federal Capital during the 1950s.

[g] It is a notable example of a kind of place or object and demonstrates the main characteristics of that kind.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[h] It has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history.

[The following response is unchanged from the Freeman report of 2009]:

The development of the Allawah and Bega Courts, and the Currong Flats in the mid 1950s, represented the first major housing project in the Federal Capital since the FCC type houses and precinctual developments of the late 1920s. The development defined the Federal commitment to the growth and development of Canberra, and defined the future growth of the commercial centre of Civic, and the importance of public housing within and adjacent [to] the city. The development was the major achievement of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee, in the period prior to the National Capital Development Committee (NCDC). The continuing commitment of the ACT Housing Trust, in its stewardship of this complex, can be seen in the major upgrade project to the flats undertaken in the 1990s.

[i] It is significant for understanding the evolution of natural landscapes, including significant geological features, landforms, biota or natural processes.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[j] It has provided, or is likely to provide, information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the natural or cultural history of the ACT because of its use or potential use as a research site or object, teaching site or object, type locality or benchmark site.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[k] For a place: it exhibits unusual richness, diversity or significant transitions of flora, fauna or natural landscapes and their elements.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

[l] For a place: it is a significant ecological community, habitat or locality for the life cycle of native species; rare, threatened or uncommon species; species at the limits of their natural range; distinct occurrences of species.

It is considered that this criterion is not applicable.

4.0 STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Like the above Assessment, the Statement of Significance combines the research and findings of this report with information contained in Peter Freeman's June 2009 "Bega and Allawa Court, Sections 52 & 57 Braddon: Preliminary Heritage Assessment and Impact Statement", and the Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter) Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (RSTCA) citation for Allawah and Bega Courts.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Allawah and Bega Court buildings, completed in 1956 and 1957 respectively, are good examples of buildings that were influenced by International Style design concepts. This is exemplified by their modern, informal site planning, by the crisp, planar forms of their original structures (before later additions were added), the large areas of glazing to the stairwells, and by other International Style formal devices such as projecting, cubistic balconies and the raising of some blocks to first floor level on reinforced concrete columns (or "pilotis"). The mature trees in and around the courts add to the aesthetic quality of the complex.

Together with the Northbourne Housing Precinct of 1959 to 1962, [designed by Ancher, Mortlock and Murray for the NCDC], the Allawah and Bega Courts are the principal remnant examples of medium density housing, demonstrating influences of International Style architecture, that were built in the Federal Capital during the 1950s.

Whilst several medium density housing complexes had been initiated and completed, the development of the Allawah and Bega Courts, and the Currong Flats in the mid 1950s, represented the first major housing project in the Federal Capital since the Federal Capital Committee type houses and precinctual developments of the late 1920s. The development continued the Federal commitment to the growth and development of Canberra, defined the future growth of Civic and highlighted the role of public housing within the city. The development was the major achievement of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee in the period prior to the establishment of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC).

5.0 HERITAGE IMPACT ASSESSMENT

This report acknowledges Section 5 of the Freeman report, particularly the Preamble and description of the Site and Master Plan. Figure 6, Section 5 of the Freeman report shows a sketch of a Master Plan option by Cox Humphries Moss Architects that proposes retention of a significant part of Bega Court, and its courtyards, for adaptive reuse as student housing. This is explained in an accompanying footnote. The concept of retaining part of Bega Court is developed further in Figure 16 on Page 37 from the Master Plan, which is attached at the end of the Freeman report. As noted previously, while there had been changes to the Master Plan from that used in the Freeman report, the concept of retaining part of Bega Court is still current.

Section 6 of the Freeman report comments on the impact of the proposed Master Plan on the significance of the Allawah and Bega Courts. In conjunction with the Statement of Significance contained in this report, the following comments are made regarding the interventions proposed in the Master Plan. These comments are set out under similar sub-headings—“Indicative Plan Layout”, “Significance”, and “Non-Retention of Courtyard Layout”—as the Freeman report. One additional section is included: “Retention of Part of Bega Court”.

5.1 INDICATIVE PLAN LAYOUT

It is noted that the Freeman report states there is “no convincing ‘historical or significance’ rationale for the ‘opening up’ of Batman Street and Moran Street to Cooyong Street”. The Freeman report also states: “such an intervention would destroy the original courtyard rationale and aesthetic of the 1950s Allawah Court development”.

In regard to the first statement above, if a decision to “open up” these streets is made, that decision should be founded upon rationale other than those based on ‘historical or significance’ criteria.

In regard to the second statement, it is agreed that: “such an intervention would destroy the original courtyard rationale and aesthetic of the 1950s Allawah Court development”.

5.2 SIGNIFICANCE

The Freeman report notes the Master Plan proposal that “the Allawah and Cooyong [Currong] flats would be demolished... and that the Bega Court development would be retained in part only”. The report then states:

*It is assessed that the Allawah and Bega Court buildings are of **moderate**²⁰ significance only because of their social, associational and historical values, and their comparative rarity. It is also understood that these pre-cast clad buildings are difficult to maintain, and perform inadequately in Canberra’s harsh climatic environment. It is assessed, however, that the courtyard and landscape layout of the Allawah and Bega Courts are of **high significance** and the retention of the courtyard and landscape layout should be a primary conservation and master plan policy.*

Peter Freeman, 2009.

In regard to the above, there are three points to be made. First, it is agreed that the Allawah and Bega Court buildings are of moderate significance only because of their social, associational and historical values, and their comparative rarity. Second, the practical and technical difficulties of living in and maintaining the Allawah and Bega Court buildings, as stated above, are noted. Third, in accordance with the findings of Section 2, it is not considered appropriate to conceptually separate the significance of elements of the complex—such as the courtyard or landscape layouts—from the significance value of the total complex.

As stated earlier, it is considered that the Allawah and Bega Court buildings are good examples of buildings that were influenced by International Style design concepts. One of those concepts—and part of their significance—is exemplified by their modern, informal site planning. This refers to the way in which the buildings were originally placed on their site. It also refers to the plan form of the buildings, their relationships to one another, and their relationships to the spaces between them. All of this requires the Allawah and Bega Court buildings, and their site, to be considered as a total cultural artefact.

²⁰ Bold highlighting is as shown in the Freeman report.

5.3 NON-RETENTION OF COURTYARD LAYOUT

It is not considered appropriate to retain the existing courtyard layout of Allawah Court if the decision is made to demolish the buildings.

The Freeman report recommends the retention of the “existing courtyard and landscape layout”, including “retention of all the mature trees, the courtyard footprints, the lane ways and the level changes within the sites”. This means that any new buildings on the sites must be placed over the “footprints” (building outlines) of the existing Allawah and Bega Court buildings.

In accordance with the findings of this report, it is considered that if Allawah Court, and part of Bega Court, were to be demolished, it would not be appropriate to retain the existing courtyard layouts, and to require that new buildings conform to that outline. It is considered that no benefit would be gained from this exercise, as the Allawah and Bega Court buildings, and the site on which they stand, are equal components of an integrated whole. If the buildings were no longer there, the courtyards would lose any context and meaning. As such, they would not provide a meaningful interpretation of the history of the site.

The plan form of the Allawah and Bega Court buildings, and the overall footprint that they make on the ground plane, are an honest and accurate reflection of their own 1950s brief requirements. In other words, the widths of the structures were based on a simple accumulation of room dimensions and circulation. It is considered that the building footprints of any new buildings proposed for the site should reflect their own brief requirements, and not be restricted to the footprint of a previous brief.

5.4 RETENTION OF PART OF BEGA COURT

It is considered highly desirable that enough building blocks of Bega Court, sufficient to retain the integrity of the principal courtyard, be retained. This is as shown on the Cox, Humphries Moss sketch of June 2009 which appears as Figure 6, Section 5 in the Freeman report, and is mentioned in footnote 5. It is noted that the concept Master Plan has evolved from that noted in the Freeman report but retention of part of the Bega Court is still proposed.

APPENDIX A

Bega and Allawah Court Sections 52 & 57 Braddon Preliminary Heritage Assessment & Impact Statement

Prepared for CHM Architects by
Peter Freeman Pty
Conservation Architects & Planners
Final June 2009

APPENDIX B

Allawah - Bega Courts Social Value Heritage Assessment

By Marilyn Truscott
Heritage Consultant

Allawah – Bega Courts

Social Value heritage assessment

It was agreed with the client on Friday 28 May 2010 that an assessment of social value was necessary as part of the heritage significance assessment of Allawah and Bega Courts, generally known to the Canberra community as the Allawah and Bega Flats. This is to address **critterion (d)** of the ACT Heritage Act 2004:

*It is highly valued by **the community or a cultural group** for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations.*

This aspect of heritage significance can only be assessed by consultation with the community / cultural groups who are local residents or user groups of a place. It cannot be determined nor claimed on behalf of the community by a heritage professional. Accepted practice in heritage assessment is to call community members and groups to a dedicated consultative workshop to draw out what associations a place might have for a community, and the meanings the place has for that community.

This did not happen in this case. The client indicated that two presentations to the community on the planning study for the potential redevelopment of Section 52 and 57 Braddon and Section 7 Reid (the flats of Allawah and Bega are located on Sections 52 and 7) were to be held for the general community in the time-frame available to the heritage consultant for the heritage assessment. It was therefore agreed to approach the community regarding 'social value' at these meetings by way of introducing them to this aspect of heritage significance and inviting their comment–this is regarded a minimal methodology at most.

These community information sessions were in the evenings of Tuesday 1 and Thursday 3 June 2010 at Olim's Hotel, Ainslie from 6.30 – 8.00 / 8.30pm. Less than a total of 50 people attended the two meetings; the consultant was able to briefly introduce what 'social value' is for heritage significance and the purpose of the survey sheets.

Five responses were received regarding Allawah and Bega Courts. The comments made are attached. They indicate some sense of continuity and community (this with some other residents but not others), an attachment to that locality, including the amenity of the closeness to shops and transport in Civic, there is a reaction against some aspects of the built form, a wish to retain others, with suggestions made.

Conclusion

It is clear that to some residents there is some social value related to the Allawah and Bega Flats and a strong wish to retain a continuity at this location, including keeping aspects of these places. The heritage assessment that can be made from the minimal approach made, suggests that a more structured approach to meet with residents, and past residents, would clarify these meanings and nature of association, and whether it is strong and deep enough to be seen to come over a heritage significance threshold. It would also identify more clearly attitudes to the impacts the proposed changes would have on such community associations and connections.

Allawah – Bega Courts Social Value heritage assessment

Definitions of social value (one form of heritage significance):

Social Value: current attachment to a place by a community or a group

ACT heritage criteria: It is highly valued by **the community or a cultural group** for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations.

Please think about the questions and fill in the answers in the space provided; examples of answers given already are below.

- 1 What is your **association** with **Allawah / Bega**: (nature, length of association)

Resident of Bega Flats since 1994 formerly stayed with friends or family at Bega Flats 1979, 1983, etc.

I have been a resident of Allawah Court, since the 1980s.

None, except as a neighbouring resident.

Resident

Local resident

- 2 Because of this association, is **Allawah / Bega Courts important to you? Why?** (write a brief statements about your feelings for the place; do they create a strong or special connection? How have your feelings **changed** over time? How does it compare with like places?)

Bega Flats is important to many people (knock down Allawah Flats, they're horrible). The environment and the people lend the Bega Flats an air of community that exists nowhere else in Gov't Housing.

Yes, they do. It is a part of the city (Civic) landscape. I do not want to move again.

Canberra has comparatively little history. Development has resulted in the removal of much of the architectural history the city had!

Very important, it's my home, I live there.

I live over / across road on Monterey and Argyle. It's an eyesore. I don't like public housing but accept the reality of it. Keep it to a minimum please.

Yes they are a local landmark.

- 3 **What aspects** are most important? (e.g. building/s, interiors, neighbourhood, people, memories, stories, photos, smells, sounds, all of it?)

Neighbourhood, people, memories, photos, stories – skip smells, tho' the drains can be pretty bad sometimes, and we are what has become a main road.

- a) *friendly neighbours*
- b) *easy access to city services (shops) etc*

Interiors [?], closeness to shops and buses

Buildings People / social aspects

4 How would you like to **maintain these associations, meanings and connections with Allawah / Bega Courts?**

Keep Block 8 of Bega Courts. And maybe the one opposite me. Keep the good tenants from both complexes in these two blocks - they'd easily fit. I'll give you a list.

By not moving to a strange place, in the suburbs!

Don't change the courtyard in Bega flats.

Some retention of original buildings

5 Any other comments?

Move on a few of the young druggies that happen to have been accidentally houses at my end of the flats, and demolish the rest. You need 2 or 3 buildings for heritage purposes.

Please forward to Marilyn Truscott, Heritage Consultant, by Tuesday 8 June 2010:
50 Namarang Crescent, Waramanga ACT 2611 / mct-oz@bigpond.net.au
or make your comments online at - www.communityengagement@act.gov.au

Name & contacts (if you wish; the consultant may follow-up your remarks with you)