

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R068

Name of Place: USA Chancery, Residence and Precinct

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: Moonah Place YARRALUMLA 2600

Block 3 Section 83 of Yarralumla

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	1984	Level of Significance:	National
Citation Revision No:	1	Category:	Government/ Diplomatic
Citation Revision Date:	June 1990	Style:	American Colonial

Date of Design:		Designer:	Frederick Larkin, the US State Dept – Australian Consultants, Moir and Sutherland supervised construction
Construction Period:		Client/Owner/Lessee:	
Date of Additions:	1948, 1958	Builder:	Simie & Co (original buildings)

Statement of Significance

The buildings of the embassy of United States of America complex are a rare example of the Post-War American Colonial style of architecture in Australia, and are based on the style of architecture of Williamsburg, Virginia. The detailing of these elegant buildings, both internally and externally is outstanding. The symmetry and proportion of the buildings imposing at a distance are emphasised by the windows which give the buildings a diminutive more human scale at close quarters, reminiscent of the buildings of the town of Williamsburg, with the exception of the large portico of the residence.

The siting of the freestanding buildings in nine acres of attractively landscaped grounds, on a small knoll gives them great prominence and emphasises their contribution to their environment. The site is formally planned, with the three buildings of the Chancery in a symmetrical layout with attractive walled gardens behind. The residence is sited in formal landscape addressing a landscaped axis. The United States of America Embassy is historically and socially important in Canberra, as one of the first diplomatic mission to acquire one of the special sites set aside for foreign missions in Yarralumla. (The accepting of the building tender and signing of the building contract occurred on the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and excavation commenced immediately).

Description

The foundation stone for the Residence of the Embassy of the United States of America was laid on 4 July 1942. The Chancery, Counselor's Residence and original entrance gates were built later, in 1948. The buildings have a commanding site with splendid panoramic views of city and mountains, and the Chancery and Councilor's residence, now offices, are set low on the fringes of the site, to avoid obscuring the view. The buildings have been designed in the style of the

architecture of Williamsburg, Virginia, with replicas of Williamsburg bricks produced after experiments at the Canberra Government Brickworks, and considerable time due to shortages of labor during the war.

The residence, similar to houses on the James River, near Williamsburg, is a two-storey Palladian composition with central block, giant order portico, side wings and attic with dormer windows projecting from the slate hip roof. The building is constructed of 230mm red brick walls with white mortar joints. The structural floors are of reinforced concrete beam and slab construction, with (tessellated) Belgian black and Australian white marble paving to the entrance hall, and Jarrah parquet to the main areas of the ground floor. The joinery, painted white externally, is constructed of Australian red cedar. The living and dining areas have painted timber dado paneling marble fireplace surrounds, and highly decorative cornices. The library is high panelled in cedar, finished to a mahogany colour with a fireplace surround of black and gold marble, and similar cornice. The hardware, plumbing, light fittings and much of the paint in original Williamsburg colours, were sent from the United States, as was the Williamsburg reproduction furniture. The chancery building, originally a simple rectangular building, extended by two wings in 1959, is built in a similar style to the residence, with a modest entry and a bust of George Washington above the door. The Ambassador's office is the most lavishly detailed room with high timber paneling, decorative fireplaces surrounds and small heavily curtained windows. The Counselor's residence is a small two-storey house in a similar style. To the north of the site are buildings originally believed to have been garages, and now used as offices. Recently a new communications building, guard box and wall to surround the complex have been built in similar character to the original buildings.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

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

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

The buildings are a rare early example of American Colonial (c.1940-1960) architecture in Australia, the design of the buildings based on the buildings of Williamsburg, Virginia.

(iii) a place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger or being lost, or is of exceptional interest

(iv) a place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations

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

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

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

The quality and siting of the buildings make an outstanding contribution to their environment - in landscaped grounds, sited on a knoll overlooking Canberra.

(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

The buildings are historically and socially important in Canberra as the first diplomatic mission to acquire one of the special sites set aside for foreign missions. Historically significant as the building tender and contract were accepted and then signed as Japan attacked Pearl Harbour. Foundation stone laid on 4 July 1942 for the Residence.

References

Other Information Sources