

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R113

Name of Place: CSC Building

Other/Former Names: The Australian Automobile Association Building

Address/Location: 212 Northbourne Avenue, BRADDON ACT 2612

Block Section of

Listing Status:
Date of Listing:
Citation Revision No:
Citation Revision Date:

Other Heritage Listings:
Level of Significance:
Category:
Style:

Date of Design:
Construction Period:
Date of Additions:

Designer:
Client/Owner/Lessee:
Builder:

Statement of Significance

The CSC building, formerly the Australian Automobile Association building, 1978-79, by Raffin Maron Architects, is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. The three storey office building is a good example of, and is one of the first in Australia of, "high-tech" architecture, which is a part of the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style (1960-), with its plain smooth wall surfaces incorporating flush glazing and anodised aluminium panelling.

The following design features are of additional significance:
externally; the flush ribbon glazing in a Corbusian motif, the non-rectangular shape and expressive form, the highly finished anodised aluminium and flush glazing, the detailing and finishes generally and the urban free standing setting within a landscaped site;
internally; the entry lobby metal wall panelling.

The architecture of this office building may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of late twentieth-century architectural styles, being the only such example in Canberra.

Description

The three-storey office building was designed by the Adelaide firm of Raffin Maron Architects in 1978 for the Australian Automobile Association and construction was completed in 1979.¹ The building is an early example of "high-tech" architecture, which is a part of the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style (1960-) with its plain smooth wall surface.²

The highly finished, anodised aluminium clad, urban freestanding building was one of the first buildings clad in this material in Australia when constructed³ and was the first and only one remaining of its type in Canberra. Apart from the cantilevered floors, to the south west, which extend over 3m the concrete structure is conventional. The architectural significance lies within the horizontal emphasis of its streamlined curved façade and its flush skin of contrasting bands of anodised aluminium panels and frameless tinted glass.

Its imagery relates to the association with automobiles in the middle of the century and its curved form is a metaphor for the car and its association with speed.

The building is on the eastern side of Northbourne Avenue, Canberra's main entry street, and is located centrally on the 6000sqm site. The planning allows the three floors of office to fan out

diagonally across the site over a basement level car park. The main entry foyer is approached from Northbourne Avenue, set back from the street, and is located at the northern end of the building. It is raised up a few steps and incorporates a spacious terrace structure formed over the basement car park entry. Visitor parking is to the west, off Northbourne Avenue, while the tenancy parking is located to the rear off Lowanna Avenue to the east with on-ground and basement parking. The three office levels are connected by a main service core to the north that protrudes in a half-circle form out from the building. It includes two lifts, toilets and tearooms. The second fire escape stair to the east is a circular form, with straight stairs, which protrudes halfway out from the façade. The roof plant room is fully integrated with the rear higher form of the office structure and cladding. The location of the plant room enables the lower and encircling form of the office floors, which face onto Northbourne Avenue, to be expressed out from the more solid higher curved rear section.

The office structure consists of three curved lines of concrete columns supporting concrete slabs with the outer columns set well back from the façade. The ground floor columns facing Northbourne Avenue are, in contrast to the other columns, expressed as isolated columns outside the building with the line of the fully glazed façade set well back behind them. This allows the cantilevering upper two levels to appear to float above the lower level. The ground floor external columns have half-round ends, and along with the raised concrete pedestrian surround have a bush-hammered finish.

The tinted flush double glazing units have sealant joints and are supported internally by aluminium mullions.

The façade is carefully detailed with the jointing of each material being aligned, including the concrete expressed joints, the soffit panel joints, the glazing and aluminium panels.

The native landscaping is noteworthy and provides an impressive setting, however, the site is restricted by a pre-existing adjacent bland single level shop in the eastern space, off Lowanna Avenue, created by the concave form of the office building. This structure is not part of the CSC Building development.

The entry terrace and lobby floor have been tiled more recently and are not in sympathy with the finishes of the building. The more recent unsophisticated terrace tiling detracts from the buildings aesthetics.

The major architectural element characteristic of the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style (1960-) displayed by this building relates to the external form. It is its plain smooth wall surfaces incorporating flush glazing and anodised aluminium panelling.

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

- the ribbon windows,
- the contrasting non-rectangular shape.

The architectural elements listed above place this high-tech building in the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style (1960-)4.

The urban freestanding building, the landscaping and the detailing and original finishes are important to the building as a whole.

There are internal elements that are important including the entry lobby metal panelling.

The building is well maintained, in good condition and intact except for the floor and terrace tiling.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

Architects who designed buildings in the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style sometimes modified the cubiform overall shape of the international style with free-curved shapes clad to portray a sleek and glossy image. These buildings also strove to convey the image of a precise technology utilising minimalist construction techniques. The finished product is referred to as High-Tech architecture.

The freestanding urban, highly finished anodised aluminium clad CSC Building, formerly the Australian Automobile Association Building, was a rare example of this type of architecture in Australia when constructed and was the first of its type in Canberra. There are no other, existing examples in Canberra, now that the Silverton Building has been demolished. It is a conventionally concrete office structure with columns and slabs. It was intended by the designers to provide an appropriate structure to form a prominent termination of the commercial precinct along the Avenue at that time 5. The convex curve angled to the avenue is an inviting and directional form that succeeds in achieving this proposition.

The fanned plan form makes best use of the site in that the diagonal placement provides the users of the office spaces with extensive views to the most distant corners of the site thus enabling the landscaping to be appreciated fully.

The concept behind the planning and aesthetics of the Australian Automobile Association building would appear to be the curved romantic association with the car in the period either side of the WWII. The forms and fenestration are a metaphor for speed while the metal cladding and curves refer to the car itself.

There is also evident, in the curved planning of this building, a reference to the pre WWI architecture of Eric Mendelsohn.

"Eric Mendelsohn formulated the streamline aesthetic so that architecture could take up the new dynamic, the challenge of the speeding car. The ribbon windows came to signify this constant stream of traffic; the facades and curving corners became a gesture of fluidity and movement."⁶

Other examples of flush skin metal panel cladding in Australia are the Headquarters Building of the Antarctic Division of the Department of Science, Kingston, Tasmania, (1979) by Architects Partnership and the Education Department Building, Perth, (1982), by Cameron Chisholm and Nicol.⁷ These two buildings, however, are rectangular and do not display the free curved shapes of the Australian Automobile Association building.

In Australian architecture the use of flush skin metal panel cladding with the associated, but subdued, technological suggestions occurred at a similar time to international examples, such as the Lloyds Building, London, 1978-80, by Sir Richard Rogers. The better-known international examples are, in the most part, more expressive of technology than the Australian examples.

Sir Zelman Cowen officially opened the building, the then Governor General of Australia, in September 1979.

The Australian Automobile Association Building was awarded an RAIA ACT Chapter Award of Merit in 1982.

The Adelaide firm of Raffin Maron Architects is an established architecture firm. This project was one of their first designs. Guy Maron AM LFRAIA ARIBA OAF, the design architect, moved to Adelaide 14 years after graduating from the University of NSW in 1962. He had worked for prominent Sydney firms and in Canada. His French parents moved to Australia prior to him entering university: he had attended schools in Indonesia and Holland. In the early 1970s his design for the High Court of Australia was one of six finalists. In 1973 he became a director of Cheesman Doley Neighbour and Raffin. During 1977 he consulted to the Department of Housing and Construction in Canberra and it appears that from this work the AAA building project was born. Since the AAA building, the firm of Raffin Maron Architects has received National RAIA design awards including the Sir Zelman Cowen Award in 1991 and a Robin Boyd Commendation in 1992.⁸

The building was until recently the Australian Automobile Association Building. It is now occupied by CSC Australia Pty Ltd, an information technology company.

Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991

(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time

The design of the office building in 1978 using cladding consisting of highly finished anodised aluminium panels and flush glazing represented a new "high-tech" aesthetic in Australia at that time. The Australian Automobile Association Building is one of the two earliest examples in Australia, built with smooth metal cladding panels, the other being the Headquarters Building of the Antarctic Division of the Department of Science, Kingston, Tasmania, (1979) by Architects Partnership. The forms of this building are a metaphor for the car and its association with speed. The choice of metal cladding is symbolic of the motor vehicle.

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

The office building exhibits one of the key architectural elements of the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style (1960-) that being plain smooth wall surface.

The following design features are of additional significance:
externally; the flush ribbon glazing in a Corbusian motif, the non-rectangular shape and expressive form, the highly finished anodised aluminium and flush glazing, the detailing and finishes generally and the urban free standing setting within a landscaped site;
internally; the entry lobby metal wall panelling.

The office building is unaltered, apart from the terrace and entry floor finishes and is a good early example of the style and cladding system in Australia, and was the first and is the only remaining Canberra example of the style.

The CSC Building is valued by the RAIA as a good example of this style and the work of Raffin Maden Architects. It was awarded an RAIA ACT Chapter Award of Merit in 1982.

(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

(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site

Through its architectural style this building is a valuable educational resource for designers. Its external architecture is characteristic of high-tech architecture, which is an important part of the Late Twentieth-Century Modern Style (1960-). It is the only Canberra example of this style.

References

- 1 Jennifer Taylor. Australian Architecture Since 1960. RAIA 1990.
 - 2 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds. Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present. Angus & Robertson 1989.
 - 3 Taylor opcit.
 - 4 Richard Apperly Robert Irving Peter Reynolds opcit.
 - 5 AAA Design Report by Raffin Maron Architects, undated.
 - 6 H Klotz. 20th Century Architecture. Academy Editions, London, 1989.
 - 7 Taylor opcit.
 - 8 Compiled from information provided by the SA Chapter of the RAIA & the office of Raffin Maron Architects.
-

Other Information Sources