

Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter
Register of Significant Architecture

RSA No: R047

Name of Place: Forrest Townhouses

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 3 Tasmania Circle and 2 Arthur Circle FORREST ACT 2603

Block 4 Section 11 FORREST

Listing Status:	Listed	Other Heritage Listings:	AIA National 20th Century Territory
Date of Listing:	1990	Level of Significance:	Residential
Citation Revision No:	2	Category:	Post-War Melbourne Regional
Citation Revision Date:	June 2019	Style:	

Date of Design:	1959	Designer:	Sir Roy Grounds of Grounds Romberg & Boyd
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Construction:	1961	Client/Owner/Lessee:	Academics Anonymous P/L
		Builder:	Civil & Civic

Statement of Significance

The Forrest Townhouses complex, completed in 1961, is important for demonstrating a high degree of architectural creativity. The layout was rare in Canberra for its time, with each two-storey townhouse having a generous courtyard and a double-height living space overlooked by a gallery and bedrooms above an intimate dining room and kitchen. Thus movement is controlled, to become a journey through the three dimensional spaces, from the narrow entry lobby into the aesthetically impressive wide and high living space, up the stairs to the gallery providing views down into the living space, to the courtyard and beyond to Arthur Circle. The use of natural materials and the absence of decoration or applied finishes adds to the creative achievement. The distinctive design was such an innovative departure from established norms in Canberra that the architect had difficulty in gaining approval for the courtyard walls, which were critical for his design. He had bamboo planted to provide privacy to residents until the walls were built. The Forrest Townhouses complex is an early example of passive heating and cooling of residential buildings, which adds to the technical achievement of its design.

The Forrest Townhouses complex has aesthetically distinctive qualities acknowledged by the Australian Institute of Architects. It was highly commended by the judges for the Canberra Medallion for meritorious architecture in 1965, was listed in the RAIA ACT Chapter Register of Significant 20th-Century Architecture in 1990 and given a RAIA ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1996 – a recognition for places of enduring architectural significance that continue to serve their users and society well. It has since been entered on the Australian Institute of Architects Register of Nationally Significant 20th-Century Architecture. The way the aesthetically impressive wide and high living space in each two-storey townhouse contrasts with more intimate rooms, the outlook into a generous courtyard and the tastefully restrained interior design are the major qualities which have led to the recognition of the complex.

This is a particularly fine example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style of architecture (1940-60). The broad characteristics of the style are exhibited here: simplicity, lightness, freshness, unpretentiousness, delicacy, elegance and low-pitched roofs emphasising the horizontality generated by simple plan-shapes.

The Forrest Townhouses complex has strong associations with the life and work of the renowned architect Sir Roy Grounds, the partner of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd responsible for its design. He formed the company for which the complex was built, and owned and occupied one of the townhouses. He was an

indomitable force in Melbourne architecture and important to the history of the ACT, principally as the architect of the iconic Shine Dome, formerly named the Academy of Science. The complex also has special associations with Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, the firm of architects which, although based in Melbourne, has been most important to the history of the ACT for being responsible for many of its mid-20th century buildings of high architectural quality.

Description

A complex of five two-storey townhouses, a bed-sitter flat and a single-storey townhouse. They are constructed of unpainted load-bearing concrete-block walls, concrete floors and steel and timber-framed low-pitched roofs. The timber-framed glazing is generally painted white externally. The original internal finishes throughout were restrained: face concrete-block walls, limed ash joinery and paneling, cork-tiled and carpeted floors and compressed-straw ceilings with exposed rafters and beams. The window walls had full-height blinds. Some oriental influence is apparent in the design of the buildings, particularly the hessian-covered large sliding doors and the planting. The architect's choice of bamboo to screen the courtyard walls arose from this influence.

The two-storey townhouses face Arthur Circle, with high courtyard walls set on the north property boundary. The northern facade of each townhouse has floor to ceiling timber-framed glazing with a wide roof overhang. Each southern facade faces onto the vehicle circulation area, entered from Tasmania Circle. The fenestration of the southern facades is a repetitive rhythm of square timber-framed windows with the upper-level windows extending to the underside of the fascia. The smaller bathroom windows are behind block grilles, as are ground floor windows to the western and eastern units.

Each two-storey townhouse is entered via a lobby into a north-facing double-height full-width living space. To the south of this space is a shower/toilet, a kitchen and a dining room screened by sliding timber doors. The living space is overlooked from the upper level, which is accessed via a carpeted concrete stair along a party wall. The stair is set behind a timber-lined balustrade wall with cupboards. At the upper level, a gallery-cum-study extends across in front of a bathroom and dressing area located between two bedrooms, each with south-facing windows. Thus movement is controlled, to become a journey through the three dimensional space, taking in varying views from the entry lobby, across the living space, up the stairs to the gallery looking down into the living space and out to the courtyard and beyond to Arthur Circle.

The bed-sitter flat is attached to the eastern-most townhouse and its roof is extended over carports to the single-storey two-bedroom townhouse, which also has a living space with floor to ceiling glazing facing into a courtyard.

The Forrest Townhouses complex is an early example of passive heating and cooling of a residential building. The large north-facing window walls allow in the low winter sun for its heat to be retained in the concrete floors and walls, while the high summer sun is excluded by the broad overhanging roofs. When needed, cooling is possible in the evenings by opening the sliding doors for any hot air to be rapidly swept out by opening skylight vents. Originally there was also a cooling system which ran water over the steel roof, but it has been removed.

The Forrest Townhouses complex is a particularly fine example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style (1940-60) of architecture. The broad characteristics of the style are exhibited here: simplicity, lightness, freshness, unpretentiousness, delicacy, elegance and low-pitched roofs emphasising the horizontality generated by simple plan-shapes. Particular style indicators exhibited are steel roofing, long unbroken roof lines, wide roof overhangs, narrow roof edges and glass walls with regularly spaced timber mullions. A characteristic of the construction exhibited is making use of the availability of then new materials, particularly compressed straw ceiling panels and quality face concrete blocks. The complex has a cubiform overall shape, which is a characteristic of the Post-War International style (1940-1960), a style generally seen in large-scale buildings. Architects who designed in the Melbourne Regional style aimed at providing south-eastern Australia with a brand of modernism, in houses and other buildings of domestic scale, more palatable than that of the International style.¹

Condition

The townhouses are well maintained and are in good condition, but there have been internal alterations.

Some residents have replaced the simple original materials with expensive marble and the like. In the central townhouse, the gallery has been extended along the party wall opposite the stairs. Throughout the townhouses, the original cork floor tiles, affected by the underfloor heating, have mostly been replaced by carpet. The large sliding doors have been removed from some units. Some steel entry gates have been added. The roof-top water-cooling system has been removed.² The bamboo, planted in 1961 to screen the courtyards, was substantially removed after the courtyard walls were approved. Most of the external walls of the townhouses are now vine-covered.

Background/History

In 1951 block 4, section 11, Forrest was intended for Australian National University staff flats, to complement those planned and since built opposite. By 1958 the project had not proceeded and the university agreed to the Department of the Interior approving a lease to Academics Anonymous Pty Ltd., a company formed by the architect Sir Roy Grounds (1905-1981) of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, who needed a base in Canberra while the firm's Australian Academy of Science and other projects were being built. Grounds was the partner responsible for the design of the townhouses. Grounds and Professor James (Jim) Davidson (1915-73), of the ANU Research School of Pacific Studies, were directors of the company.³

The architecture of the two-storey townhouses appears to have been influenced by the work of the great Swiss architect Le Corbusier in the 1920s, particularly versions of his "model house", named *Maison Citrohan*. The best examples are row houses, having large living rooms contrasting with smaller rooms, in the Weissenhof Estate, Stuttgart, Germany, built in 1927. The way the single-storey townhouse in the Forrest complex relates to its courtyard recalls such an arrangement in the influential "Country House for a Bachelor" by the pioneer modern architect Mies van der Rohe erected at the Berlin Building Exposition of 1931.

Construction was completed in 1961 by Civil and Civic, a leading Sydney building company which was becoming established in Canberra.⁴ The work was supervised by Theo Bischoff, a local architect who had studied under Grounds. Of the five two-storey townhouses, one was for Grounds, another for Davidson, a third for Colonel A. H. Gibson of Melbourne, a retired army officer, and the easternmost townhouse was leased to local architectural firms,⁵ Scollay, Bischoff & Pegrum from 1965 to 1968, then by Bischoff alone.⁶ The bedsitter to the rear of this townhouse had an interconnecting door, allowing it to be either combined with the townhouse or let separately.⁷ It was initially used as the Canberra office of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd.⁸ The single-storey townhouse was, at first, the family residence of the firm's full-time assistant, Friedrich (Fritz) Suendermann, who had been responsible for the working drawings. The courtyard walls built on the Arthur Circle boundary line were a departure from the Garden City planning which was the dominant philosophy for Canberra.⁹ They were demolished in 1961 for contravening building by-laws. Bamboo, chosen by Grounds, was then planted to provide some privacy to the residents. The walls were later approved and rebuilt.¹⁰

The townhouses have been occupied by many distinguished residents. Federal minister Sir David Fairbairn (1917-1994) lived here in the 1970s and in retirement from 1980. Prime Minister Sir William and Lady McMahon owned and have occupied the single-storey townhouse. The architect of Parliament House, Aldo Giurgola AO (1920-2016) owned the western-most townhouse for several years in the 1980s. The businessman/developer Terry Snow AM has lived in one of the townhouses, as have various academics, including Professor Judith Brine AM, past Dean and head of the University of Canberra's Faculty of Environmental Design.¹¹

The Forrest Townhouses complex received no architecture award when it was new and commonly referred to as flats or home units. When the time came in 1965 for it to be considered, only single family houses qualified for the RIAA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion meritorious architecture. The press reported "although not eligible...for an award, the judges highly commended the flats in Arthur Circle, designed by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, of Melbourne."¹² The Forrest Townhouses complex was listed in the RIAA ACT Chapter Register of Significant 20th-Century Architecture in 1990 and given a RIAA ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1996 – a recognition for places of enduring architectural significance that continue to serve their users and society well. It has since been entered on the Australian Institute of Architects Register of Nationally Significant 20th-Century Architecture.

Sir Roy Grounds and Grounds, Romberg & Boyd

Sir Roy Burman Grounds (1905-1981) graduated from the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier, travelled to England in 1929, and on to the USA. He worked in New York, then in Hollywood, designing sets

for MGM and RKO. Here he encountered the modernist architecture of Richard Neutra. Back in Australia, he and Geoffrey Mewton won several prizes for strongly modernist designs in the Melbourne Centenary Homes Competition (1934). Grounds completed several homesteads, flats and houses before working in England for the notable Australian architect Raymond McGrath. In 1940 he was back in Melbourne, designing flats with open plans and flat roofs, then buildings for the RAAF during WWII. In the 1950s he was designing houses using primary shapes for their plan outlines, which sparked a debate on functionalism versus formalism, during which Grounds claimed they asserted order and repose.¹³ His own house in Toorak (1953), with a circular courtyard within a square open plan, one of the most celebrated works of modernist domestic architecture of the mid 20th century in Victoria, won the first post-war Victorian Architectural Medal. Grounds built a string of units attached to the rear of this house, three of which have double-height living spaces with tall window walls facing courtyard gardens.¹⁴ They are prototypes for his Forrest townhouses.

Grounds, while deputy head of the University of Melbourne architecture school (1948-52), taught with Frederick Romberg (1913-1992) and Robin Boyd (1919-1971). The three formed the renowned Grounds, Romberg & Boyd partnership in 1953. As each was a talented designer, projects were usually retained by individual partners. Grounds extended his ideas for geometric houses to the circular plan of the domed Australian Academy of Science (renamed the Shine Dome) in Canberra (1956-9). He won a limited competition for its design and it is now one of the city's few internationally significant buildings. The firm briefly operated a Canberra branch office at the Forrest Townhouses in 1961. Notable contributions by Grounds, Romberg and Boyd to Canberra's domestic architecture while in partnership include the Fenner house, Red Hill (1954), which won the prestigious 1956 Sulman Award; Manning Clark House, Tasmania Circle, Forrest (1952-60), both designed by Boyd, and three houses in Vasey Crescent, Campbell, (1961) by Grounds. Other significant buildings completed in the ACT include the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Turner (1959-62) by Romberg and the CSIRO Phytotron, Acton (1962) by Grounds. After the partnership broke up came the ANU Botany Building (1968), by Grounds, the ANU Zoology Building (1963-8) by Boyd and the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Headquarters, Braddon, (1968-72) by Boyd and Romberg.¹⁵

In 1959 the firm was awarded the commission to design the National Gallery of Victoria and Cultural Centre, with Grounds the architect in charge. When Boyd and Romberg were mildly critical of the preliminary designs, relations between the partners became strained. In 1962 Grounds left the partnership, taking the commission with him. He devoted the next twenty years of his life to this major project. The gallery was completed in 1968 and the Arts Centre in 1984. After leaving the partnership, Grounds contributed further to Canberra's domestic architecture with the Nicholson house, 24 Cobby Street, Campbell (1963-4), and the Sir Otto Frankel house (4 Cobby Street), Campbell, (1969-70).¹⁶

Grounds was a key practitioner of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style of architecture (c1940-1960).¹⁷ His understanding of the style arose from his having a close association with Robin Boyd, the author of *Victorian Modern* in 1947, the book which helped establish the style. In 1968 Grounds was awarded the RAIA Gold Medal, the highest honour the institute can bestow, and was knighted in the same year. The architecture critic Jennifer Taylor has written of him "From his early houses to (the) last completed works Grounds was an indomitable force in Melbourne architecture...In this country he ranks as one of the most challenging and commanding architects of his time."¹⁸

Analysis against the criteria in the Heritage Act 2004 set out in the ACT Heritage Council Heritage Assessment Policy document dated March 2018

The Forrest Townhouses complex has been assessed against the heritage significance criteria and found to have heritage significance when assessed against three criteria: (d) (e) (f) and (h).

(d) Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects

The Forrest Townhouses complex is a particularly fine example of the Post-War Melbourne Regional style of architecture (1940-60). The broad characteristics of the style are exhibited here: simplicity, lightness, freshness, unpretentiousness, delicacy, elegance and low-pitched roofs emphasising the horizontality generated by simple plan-shapes. Particular style indicators exhibited are steel roofing, long unbroken roof lines, wide roof overhangs, narrow roof edges and glass walls with regularly spaced timber mullions. A characteristic of the construction of buildings in this style is making use of the availability of then new materials, notably compressed straw ceiling panels and quality face concrete blocks. All these characteristics and indicators have high integrity.

(e) Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by the ACT community or a cultural group in the ACT

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(f) Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period

The Forrest Townhouses complex, completed in 1961, is important for demonstrating a high degree of creative achievement by its architect apparent in the design of this distinctive group of townhouses. They were laid out in a manner rare in Canberra, with each two-storey townhouse having a generous courtyard and a double-height living space overlooked by a gallery and bedrooms, above an intimate dining room and kitchen. Thus movement is controlled, to become a journey through the three dimensional spaces, from the narrow entry lobby into the aesthetically impressive wide and high living space, up the stairs to the gallery providing views down into the living space, to the courtyard and beyond to Arthur Circle. The use of natural materials and the absence of decoration or applied finishes adds to the creative achievement. The distinctive design was such an innovative departure from established norms in Canberra that the architect had difficulty in gaining approval for the courtyard walls, which were critical for his design. He had bamboo planted to provide privacy to residents until the walls were built. The Forrest Townhouses complex is an early example of passive heating and cooling of residential buildings, which adds to the technical achievement of its design.

(h) Has a special association with the life and work of a person, or people, important to the history of the ACT

The Forrest Townhouses complex has special associations with the life and work of the renowned architect Sir Roy Grounds, the partner of Grounds, Romberg & Boyd responsible for its design. He formed the company for which the complex was built, and owned and occupied one of the townhouses. He was an indomitable force in Melbourne architecture and important to the history of the ACT, principally as the architect of the iconic Shine Dome, formerly named the Academy of Science. The complex also has special associations with Grounds, Romberg & Boyd, the firm of architects which, although based in Melbourne, has been most important to the history of the ACT for being responsible for many of its mid-20th century buildings of high architectural quality.

This citation was completed by Ken Charlton AM LFRAIA in 2019

Endnotes

- ¹ Richard Apperly, Robert Irving, Peter Reynolds, *Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. Angus and Robertson 1989.
- ² Ann Kent, of 4/3 Tasmania Circle, Forrest. Letter to Eric Martin AM FRAIA, 19 January 2019.
- ³ Tim Reeves and Alan Roberts, Forrest Townhouses in *100 Canberra houses: a century of capital architecture*, Halstead Press, 2013.
- ⁴ Friedrich (Fritz) Suendermann, pers. comm. to Graeme Trickett, FRAIA, 2004.
- ⁵ Graeme Trickett, Forrest Townhouses, RAIA (ACT) Register of Significant 20th Century Architecture Citation, 2004.
- ⁶ *The Canberra Times*, 21 October 1965, p 32 and 6 July 1968, p 20
- ⁷ Trickett, op cit.
- ⁸ Reeves and Roberts, op cit.
- ⁹ Trickett, op cit.
- ¹⁰ *The Canberra Times*, 20 June 1961, p 3
- ¹¹ Reeves and Roberts, op cit.
- ¹² *The Canberra Times*, 22 November 1965, p 11
- ¹³ Conrad Hamann, Grounds, Roy in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge U.P., 2012, p 301
- ¹⁴ Victorian Heritage Database, 24 Hill Street Toorak, 2001
- ¹⁵ Hamann, op cit. and AIA (ACT) Register of Significant Architecture.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Apperly et al, p 221
- ¹⁸ Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, RAIA 1990, p 32