

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R087

Name of Place: Embassy of Ireland Chancery and Staff Quarters

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 20 Arkana Street Yarralumla ACT 2600
Block 7 Section 84 of Yarralumla

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings: None
Date of Listing:	2012	Level of Significance: National
Citation Revision No:	1	Category: Diplomatic buildings
Citation Revision Date:	2016	Style: Not applicable

Date of Design: 1979 Designer: Philip Cox and Partners

Construction Period: 1979 Client/Owner/Lessee: Ambassador of Ireland
Builder: K.B. Hutcherson Pty Ltd

Date of Residence Addition (Not in listing): 2003

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The Embassy of Ireland, a rare example of a pair of small-scaled public buildings with domestic character, has been commended in the ACT Chapter of the RAI A architecture awards for its quality of calmness and dignity, its appropriate domestic scale in the suburban environment and its very restrained, simplified yet sophisticated detailing.

The Embassy buildings are important for their associations with Philip Cox, one of Australia's most important architects. In 1984 he was awarded the RAI A Gold Medal, the highest honour the Institute can bestow. The buildings have the potential to be a valuable research and educational resource, particularly for students of architecture, building and design.

Description

The chancery and the staff quarters, completed in 1979, are single-storey, rendered-brick walled, gable-roofed buildings conceived as reminders of traditional Irish farmhouses, cast in a contemporary idiom. As such the design is not clearly in an Australian style. Vertical masonry elements containing exhaust flues and plant towers terminate the horizontal forms. A residence for the ambassador, to be located at the rear of the site, was designed as part of the concept.¹ It was redesigned and constructed in 2003 and is not part of this listing.

The walls of both buildings were rendered with pigment-impregnated mortar utilizing white cement. Roof tiles are concrete, profiled and coloured to resemble grey-green slates. The chancery is planned as two wings – the formal area associated with the ambassador's room and conference room, adjacent to the private secretary's office, and the general office wing, with an entrance hall between the two areas. Initially, there was a central corridor, with offices on either side. The staff quarters were planned as a three-bedroom house. Between the buildings is the main gate leading to the residence. This and many systems in their construction give a high degree of security for the chancery and residence. The buildings are orientated just east of north, to maximise morning sun penetration. White steel pergolas, intended to be vine-covered, shade the buildings on three sides. Landscaping with deciduous trees, native Australian and Irish species of

¹ Irish Embassy, Canberra. Architects' statement, in *Architecture Australia*, November 1980, pp 63-4.

shrubs and ground cover and extensive lawns enable the buildings to integrate well with the landscape of Canberra.²

Background/History

The architect Philip Cox (1939-) intended to achieve both an Irish and Australian identity in this group of buildings by integrating compatible vernacular forms.³ After graduating from Sydney University in 1962, rather than touring Europe, he remained in Australia, preferring to understand his own country. He soon entered private practice and established Philip Cox and Partners in 1967. His firm has consistently won awards and has grown into an international practice, with many overseas projects. In 1984 he was awarded the RAI Gold Medal, the highest honour the Institute can bestow.⁴

In the Canberra Medallion section of the RAI ACT Chapter awards of 1983, the Embassy of Ireland received a commendation for its quality of calmness and dignity, its appropriate domestic scale in the suburban environment and its very restrained, simplified yet sophisticated detailing, with its colours and material selection following this controlled theme.⁵

The highly regarded architectural historian and critic Jennifer Taylor, writing in 1990, noted Cox's consistency in applying his domestic language to buildings with more public usage. She described the small-scaled Embassy of Ireland buildings as "uncommonly reserved", particularly among the buildings of Canberra's Embassy district.⁶

Condition

The interior of the chancery, except for the ambassador's formal area, has been renovated as open-planned office space. Part of the living room of the staff quarters has been utilised for file storage. Staff no longer reside there permanently, but visitors may stay in a bed-sitting arrangement. The remainder provides staff recreation space. Externally, the original pigmented render has been painted and the growth of vines over the pergolas has been minimal. A level path to provide wheel-chair access to the entrance has been sympathetically introduced, while the original steps remain.⁷

ANALYSIS AGAINST THE CRITERIA PURSUANT TO S.10 OF THE HERITAGE ACT 2004:

(b) it exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group;

The Embassy of Ireland has been commended in the ACT Chapter of the RAI architecture awards for its quality of calmness and dignity, its appropriate domestic scale in the suburban environment and its very restrained, simplified yet sophisticated detailing.

(f) it is a rare or unique example of its kind, or is rare or unique in its comparative intactness

The Embassy of Ireland is a rare example of a pair of gently scaled public buildings with domestic character.

(h) it has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history

The buildings are important for their associations with Philip Cox, one of Australia's most important architects. In 1984 he was awarded the RAI Gold Medal, the highest honour the Institute can bestow.

(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

² *ibid.*

³ Embassy of Ireland, Yarralumla, in *Architecture Australia, Awards/83*, December 1983, p 11.

⁴ Peter Webber, 'Cox, Philip' in *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge UP, 2012

⁵ Embassy of Ireland, Yarralumla, in *Architecture Australia, Awards/83*, December 1983, p11.

⁶ Jennifer Taylor, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, RAI Second Edition, 1990, pp114-5

⁷ Site inspection on 28 March 2012.

These buildings have the potential to be a valuable research and educational resource, particularly for students of architecture, building and design.