



## ACT Heritage Council

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN (BLOCK 8 SECTION 9, DEAKIN)

At its meeting of 5 April 2018 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin was eligible for provisional registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### HISTORY

The residence at 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin was designed by Harry Seidler and Associates for Mr Ivor Bowden, a diplomatic candidate, in 1951-52 with construction completed by Plimmer and McPhail in 1955 (ACTPLA). It is also known by the name 'Bowden House'. This building was Seidler's first residential commission outside Sydney (Reeves & Roberts 2007). Seidler designed two detached houses in the ACT, of which only 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin survives. The other residence was a small two bedroom cottage that was later extended to the rear by Seidler, at 12 Yapunyah Street, O'Connor. This property was demolished in 2007.

#### Harry Seidler O.B.E. FAIA LFRAIA MRAIC AC

Harry Seidler (1923-2006) was born in Vienna in 1923 into a middle-class Jewish family. Seidler arrived in Sydney in 1948 from the USA after studying under and working for some of the leading architects of the modern movement, such as Gropius, Breuer, Albers and Niemeyer. He was part of a group of post-war European immigrant architects bringing international architectural theories and practice to Australia. He is recognised as one of Australia's leading architects, whose primary import to Australian architecture is that he is one of the strongest, most visible proponents of true modernist architecture. He was the first architect in Australia to express fully the principles of the Bauhaus movement (Taylor 1990).

The Bauhaus philosophy, in the simplest sense, involves radically simplified forms and the absence of ornament (Reeves & Roberts 2007). The original aim of the Bauhaus School of design was to re-educate the artist to a new role in an industrial and democratic society and to design for industrial production. The architecture that developed from this became known as the International Style, combining ideological social criteria with aesthetic considerations, and placing an emphasis on volume rather than mass and the avoidance of decoration. The style is characterised by white cubic forms, large areas of glass and long horizontal bands of windows, and often having the structure of the building expressed rather than enclosed by the cladding (Apperly et al, 1994). With its commitment to abstracting forms and an aesthetic which claimed to unite the artist with the community, the Bauhaus was 'seeking a common denomination in design' (Herbert, 1959, p.3).

Seidler's enthusiasm in promoting modernism in the ACT was driven by a desire for change. As Seidler noted "a lot of people were genuinely sick of the rather routine brick boxes that were built everywhere [in the ACT] at that time, and the place was simply ripe for new things" (Frampton & Drew 1992).

He was awarded the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) highest honour, its Gold Medal in 1976. Examples of his work in the ACT include medium density housing (in the form of townhouses) in Campbell, Garran and Yarralumla, and the Barton Trade Offices (a large precast concrete office building near the Parliamentary Triangle in Barton).

Seidler's work throughout the 1950s largely consisted of designing houses for private clients. The owner of the Yapunyah Street residence, Mr John Zwar, commissioned Seidler as a direct result of reviewing the property at 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin. Zwar believed the property epitomised the concept of a radical modernist house in the national capital as a 'counterpoint to the existing architecture' (Cameron 2012, p.6), which Zwar felt to be mundane

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

and functionally deficient.

11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin is considered by the Australian Institute of Architects to be a very good example (Item No. R111) of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) and the internal play of forms and levels that are important themes in this type of architecture. The design includes features which are particular to this style, including cubiform overall shape and large sheets of glass. The visual appearance of buildings; their form, detail and colour, combined to become a physical representation of the new world order. It was this modern, post-war world of progress and innovation that influenced the design aesthetic of Northcote Crescent. As Drew (Frampton & Drew 1992, p.19) commented, Seidler's new clients were responding 'to the clarity and rationalism of Modernism' that Seidler promised.

The 1950s brought with it an increase in Canberra's population and the gradual movement of federal government departments to the city along with the creation of the NCDC in 1957. The arrival of senior government officials from Sydney and Melbourne brought with them a desire to commission architects from their home cities to design their new houses in the ACT. The presence of post-war Sydney and Melbourne streams of modernist residential architecture together in the ACT is unusual and seldom found elsewhere in Australia (Canberra House: Canberra's growth).

At the same time, the NCDC increased the amount of commissioned government work for public building, also attracting leading architects to the ACT. As a result of these influences, there are some excellent examples of Post-War Melbourne Regional (e.g. Grounds and Boyd) and Post-War International architecture (e.g. Sydney architects Seidler and Ancher) from this period in the ACT. 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin is considered one of the ACT's two most significant Post-War International Style houses (AIA), the other being the Round House, at 10 Gawler Crescent, Deakin. The Round House was designed by Alex Jelinek in 1956 and constructed in 1957.

Seidler himself refers to 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin as an excellent example of the reductive elegance of the Bauhaus design philosophy. Seidler claimed it as one of his favourite designs, dedicating a lengthy seven page spread to the residence in the 1954 portfolio of his work titled *Houses, Interiors and Projects* (1954). During an interview on ABC radio in 2006 Seidler expressed his disappointment about the proposed demolition of the Yapunyah St residence, but stated that of his two free standing houses in the ACT, he considered 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin to be the better example of modernist domestic architecture. It is believed that Seidler used this house in lectures as an example that typifies his early work.

### DESCRIPTION

The residence displays similar forms, materials and design principles seen in Seidler's larger more well-known houses such as the R Seidler House at Turrumurra (1947-50) which shares the open plan, large glass windows and limited colour palette of 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin. The Dr S Fink House at Newport (1949-51) in particular uses the broken or 'butterfly' roof form employed at 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin (Johnson 1980).

The following description is primarily drawn from the citations in the Australian Institute of Architects Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture (RSTCA).

The house is set centrally on the large block. The site has a diagonal slope across its width which influenced the layout of the building, resulting in an arrangement on three different levels. Retaining walls form level terrace spaces for the outside areas. The building is constructed of random stone walls, rendered cavity brickwork, suspended concrete slabs, steel and timber roof framing with a metal deck roof. The carport is excavated into the site at the low side, below the bedroom level. Covered access to the carport is achieved from the intermediate living space.

The off centre entry is approached up a stair of six reinforced concrete cantilevered open treads with a simple pipe handrail. It is located under the roof line and given prominence by the random stone walls. The front door opens into a random stone paved lobby behind a quarter height random stone fire place with a tall slender white rendered central chimney. The entry is on an axis with and parallel to the full height and full length living room north-west facing glazing. This glazing extends towards the kitchen, and the axis originally onward to the landscape through the kitchen door. The entry emphasises the juxtaposition of material that was important in Seidler's work with the play of rough stone with smooth render and glass.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

The split level planning divides the residence into living spaces and rest areas. The design exploits the interplay of horizontal and vertical space with planning themes centred on the living room. The living room rear wall, which separates it from the upper sleeping areas, is lined in Tongue and Groove panelling. The room opens out to the north-west through full height steel framed sliding glass doors onto a terrace. The terrace has a wide overhanging soffit, which is angled specifically to allow winter sun to penetrate deep into the room, but to prevent the hot summer sun from entering.

The two main levels are joined by a continuous sloping ceiling that creates a spatial interplay between the living and bedroom spaces. Spatial design is a key characteristic of Seidler's work and is clearly demonstrated in this house.

Originally the main bedroom could overlook the living room from the upper level with curtains dividing the rooms when privacy was required, however the bedroom has now been enclosed.

The upper bedroom level is approached by a centrally supported double beam, open tread timber stair echoing the theme of the entry stair. The corridor at this level is a secondary axis parallel to the main axis. Originally there was glazing at both ends of the house that allowed views along the corridor and into the landscape. This axis was emphasised externally by a stone blade wall, which extended east from the second bedroom, and culminated at the west end in the balcony off the main bedroom.

The upper level consisted originally of two bedrooms, a study and bathroom where the ceiling, like the lower level, followed the roof pitch. With the addition of two bedrooms, a bathroom and the enclosing of the main bedroom and its balcony, the original planning themes to the upper level have been predominantly changed. The themes involved the external form of the house extending into the landscape via the use of low level walls perpendicular to the perimeter walls of the house and adjacent to glazing, reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe's designs in the 1920's (Seidler, 1954). The small east side terrace separated the second bedroom from the utility area and provided an external space to the east. This terrace was rarely used by the owner (Canberra House, personal communication with Mr Bowden).

The north-west wall, which extends from the terrace, reinforces the internal division from entry to living and defines the change in the terrace structure from on the ground to a suspended structure at the west end and maintains the design intent of extending the house into the landscape.

The slope of the main terrace roof appears to 'open up' to the view to mountains on the north-west which in turn creates an opposing incline to that of the roof line (Seidler, 1954).

The terrace sliding doors were constructed using sheet glass of the largest size available at the time. Sun control and functional requirements are significant propellants of the Bauhaus design. In plan the bedrooms and quiet areas are distributed in a long rectangular form with south-east aspect for early morning sun penetration. They are separated by a change in level from the living areas. The living areas have a north-west aspect with the roofed terrace designed to protect the interior from hot summer sun and to permit the entry of winter sun. These attempts at solar protection were very much of their era, as 1950s sheet glass was thermally inefficient. The owners have added retractable exterior shade blinds above the street facing windows (see image 8 and 10).

The carport was located under the main bedroom and study taking advantage of the sloping site. The cantilevered bedroom balcony projected towards the mountain views, which are now obscured by planting and development. The cantilever was used to emphasise the extension of the form of the upper level and its structure with the balustrade side detached so as not to interfere with the stone wall and the reading of the building mass. With the enclosure of the balcony and carport these elements are now lost, but can be reinstated in the future.

The garden originally had a small number of established native trees but now has a rather overgrown, well-established garden.

The major architectural elements that are peculiar to the Post-War International Style (1940-1960) and that are overtly displayed by this building relate to the external forms (Apperly, Irving & Reynolds 1994). They are:

- cubiform overall shape, and
- the use of large sheets of glass.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

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

- overhanging for shade (i.e. wide, overhanging eaves),
- plain smooth wall surfaces;
- Corbusian window motif;
- contrasting texture (notably the use of natural stone, which is a feature of Seidler's work).

The original cantilevered balcony off the main bedroom, which has now been enclosed but is structurally intact, is an element of the style. This has the potential to be reinstated in the future.

The roof design was originally detailed so that there was no box gutter at the low point of the roof, instead the membrane roof had a 'valley' along its length which occurred along the line of the terrace glazing, thus emphasising the axis (ACTPLA). However, this detail was not built. The roofing installed is metal decking with a box gutter.

The building has been altered and extended twice, the first time in 1957-60 by Seidler and the second time in 1978 by the ACT architect C G Cummings (ACTPLA).

The Seidler work entailed the addition to the north east of two bedrooms, a new laundry with the kitchen being extended into the original laundry space and the extension of the dining room into the court with a small recessed terrace to the north east. The original design aesthetic was maintained with matching wall finishes and roofing.

The later alterations, although carried out due to changes in life style of the owners, have detracted from the original design philosophy. The alterations to the main bedroom were firstly the enclosure of the cantilevered balcony and secondly the closing off of the internal open view from the bedroom down over the lower living room. The other alterations were to the study and dining room: the external study door was removed and a cupboard installed, and the north east recessed terrace off the dining room was enclosed to extend the dining room.

Of all the later alterations the enclosure of the main bedroom balcony has been the most substantial; at the western side of the house it has changed the external appearance. This design feature was a major expression of the internal spaces, structure and architectural style (Blake 1973).

### Physical condition and integrity

- In summary, the original fabric of the original house comprises:
  - the metal roof (shown as a seamless 5 ply asbestos membrane in the drawings, but built in metal with a valley gutter, copper flashings and concealed copper rainwater downpipes;
  - the simple palette of materials used with contrasting effect in plain and textured wall surfaces, such as the contrasting use of random stone, glass and painted common brickwork; large areas of steel framed sliding doors set in timber joinery contrasting with small windows expressed as 'holes in the masonry wall'; and timber used for trim both externally and internally;
  - interior details such as concealed lighting, joinery and fireplace and cloak storage details including the steel trowelled, coloured cement hearth and entrance area; the random stone fireplace and fire brick rendered flu with external concrete pipe.
- The character of the block and garden planting:
  - the original informality of the garden with emphasis on an open natural character and views of the Brindabella Mountains. This has changed with additional planting. The early photographs (Image 2-4) shows the house ideally, prior to the building of neighbouring houses. This landscape effect no longer exists;

The features intrinsic to the heritage significance of 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin comprise those elements which exemplify the Post-War International Style. They are:

- the simple cubiform design of the building including the roof form and the balconies, terraces and the roofed

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

entrance staircase within the form.

The clean cubiform geometry is in part masked by additions, which were first undertaken by Seidler and then local architect C G Cummings. The Seidler additions of 1960 added a bedroom and bathroom under a roof slope which formed a gable with the existing roof, compromising its dynamic form within the original clean geometry. While Seidler retained the open outdoor spaces within the form in 1960, there has since been some infill with the additions of 1978. These additions affect the south-west balcony, which is no longer cantilevered and has been enclosed to form part of a new master bedroom (1978); also the dining room has been extended (1978) into the external porch area (1960).

The features that have been modified from the original design include:

- the enclosure of the cantilevered balcony off the main bedroom;
- the closing off of the internal open view from the bedroom down over the lower living room;
- the removal of the external access door to the study (replaced by the installation of a cupboard);
- the enclosure of the north east recessed terrace to extend the dining room; and
- the installation of solar panels on the roof.

## SITE PLAN



**Image 1** 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin site boundary

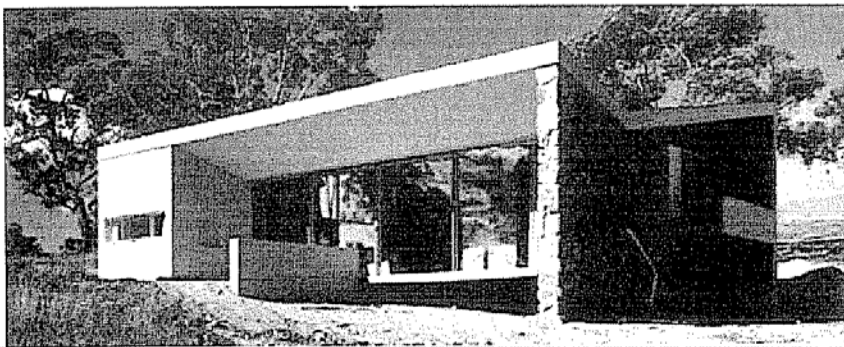


## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

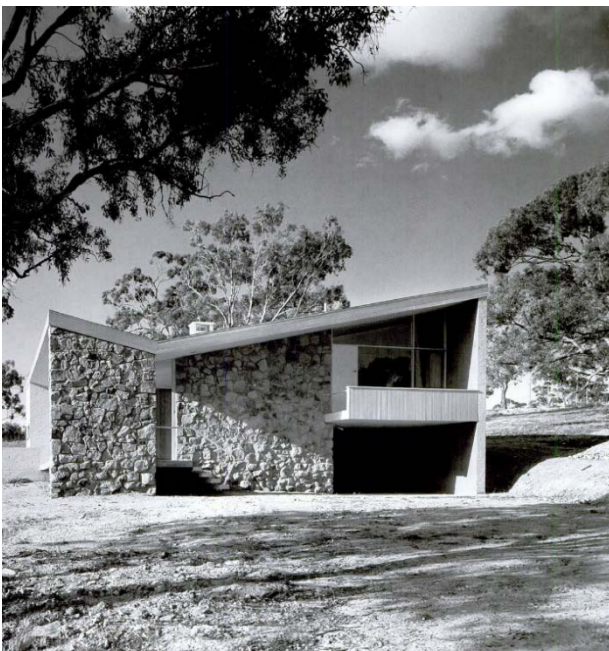
### IMAGES



**Image 2. 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin – the NAA dates this photo from 1956, but it is more than likely from 1954**  
Image courtesy of the National Archives of Australia (NAA)



**Image 3. 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin – view from south-west 1954** Image courtesy of Max Dupain, Seidler (1954, p.53).



**Image 4. 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin – showing the 'butterfly' roof & the cantilevered main bedroom balcony.**  
Image courtesy of Seidler, 1954

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN**



**Image 5. 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin – interior.** Image courtesy of Seidler, 1954



**Image 6. Current view from street showing garden walls** Image courtesy of ACT Heritage 2017



**Image 7. Partial view from street.** Image courtesy of ACT Heritage 2017



**BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN**



**Image 8. View from street.** Image courtesy of ACT Heritage 2018



**Image 9. View from driveway.** Image courtesy of ACT Heritage 2018



**Image 10. Partial view from street.** Image courtesy of ACT Heritage 2018



BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

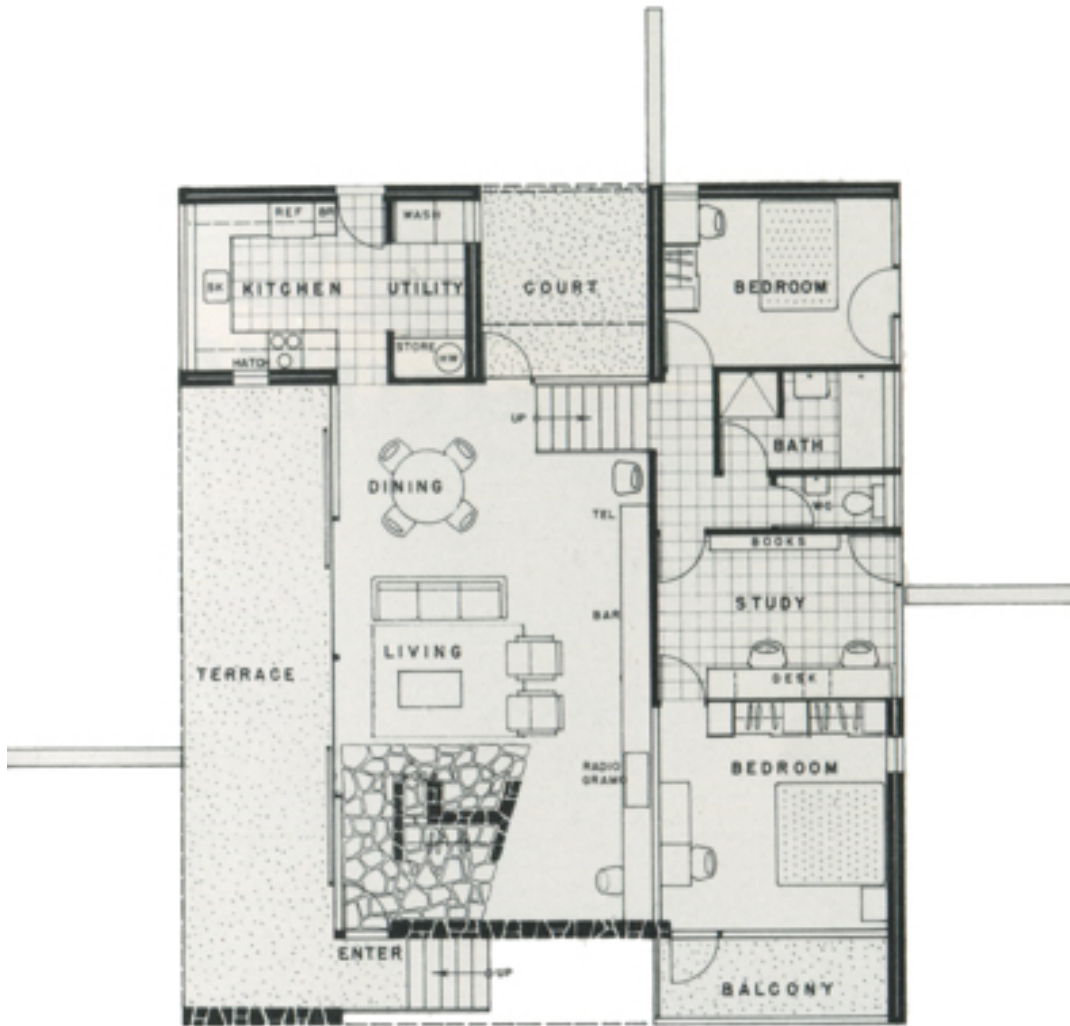
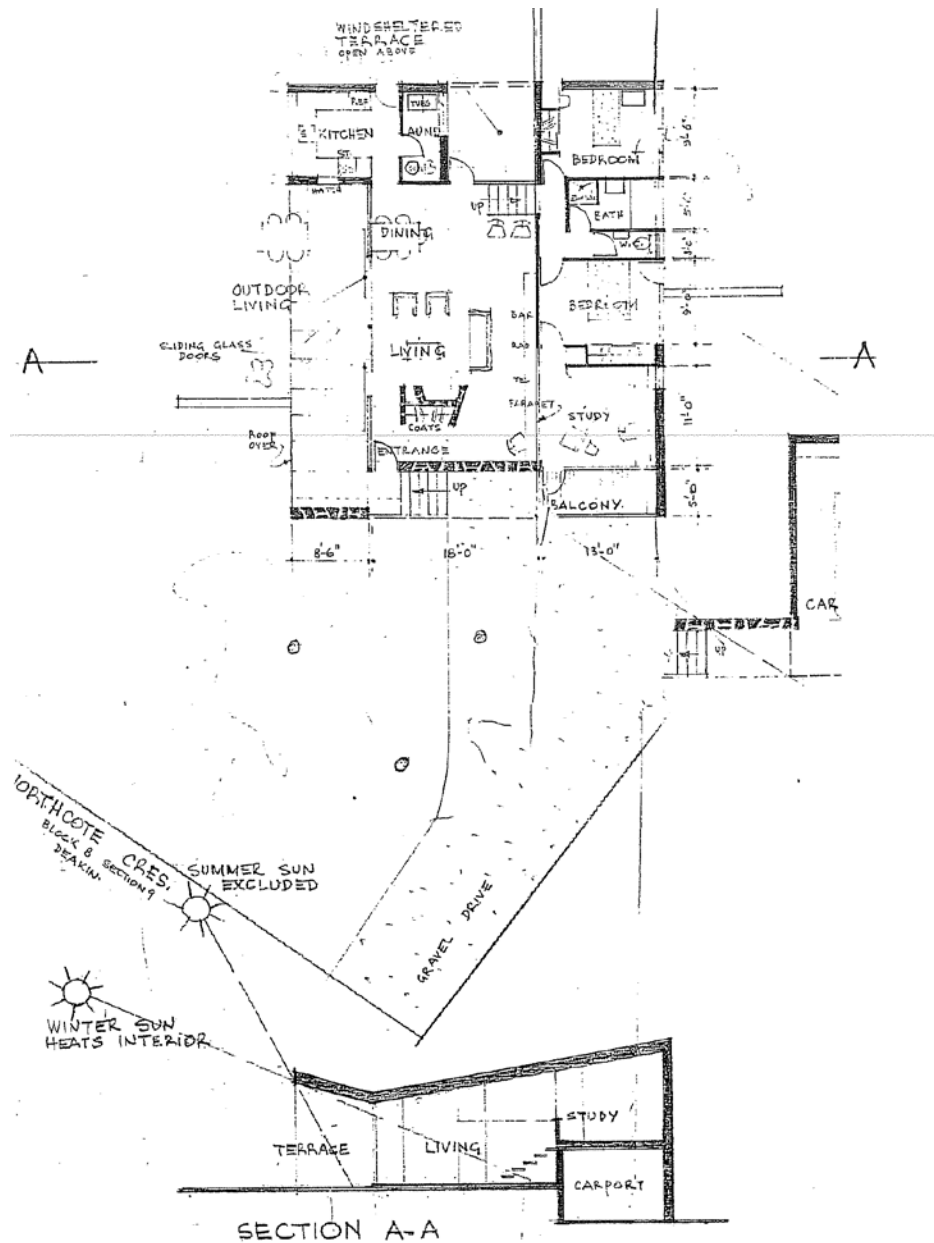


Image 11. The original floorplan, Image courtesy of canberrahouse.com.au

# BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN



**Image 12. Original Plan and Section of 11 Northcote Crescent, Deakin.** ACT Land and Planning Authority (ACTPLA), Customer Services, Mitchell. Building File for Block 8 Section 9 Deakin.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – 11 NORTHCOTE CRESCENT, DEAKIN

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