



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION NORWOOD PARK CREMATORIUM (BLOCK 1 SECTION 54, MITCHELL)

At its meeting of 30 May 2019 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Norwood Park Crematorium was eligible for provisional registration

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Norwood Park Crematorium against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

HISTORY

Provision for dealing with Canberra's dead was not a high priority in the early Federal Capital. The issue was raised in the *Federal Capital Pioneer* on 1 January 1925, which also opened the debate in Canberra on whether a crematorium would be a better option, a debate that had been heating up in Australia since the 1890s (Nicol, 2003:11-28; Jalland, 2005:2). It was not until the end of 1935 that the first Canberra cemetery at Woden was opened, and, while it was not ruled out, a crematorium was not an option the government was going to pursue but at the same time noted that a private crematorium would not be objected to (*The Canberra Times* 21 October, 1931:1). It was not until 1972 that the second Canberra cemetery at Mitchell was announced (*The Canberra Times* 2 September 1972:7).

The debate for widespread adoption of cremation in Australia was popularised by such figures as Henry Keylock Rusden and Dr John Le Gay Brereton in the 1890s and Dr John Mildred Creed in the early 20th century (Nicol, 2003:11-28, 148; Jalland, 2005:2). It was a cause that existed largely in intellectual society and supported by the formation of cremation societies in most states (Nicol, 2003:11-28). Despite the first modern crematorium being built in Adelaide in 1903 and the other states to follow in the next two decades, cremation was not a popular option and was actively opposed by the Catholic Church which banned the practice (Nicol, 2003:244, 299; Jalland, 2005:7-10). However, after two World Wars, an influenza epidemic and depression, society's views on dealing with and commemorating the dead changed and cremation started to become much more widely accepted (Nicol, 2003:244, 314; Jalland, 2005:15). The Catholic Church lifted its ban in 1964, cremation facilities continued to improve and become more acceptable and by the 1990s, cremation was more prevalent than burial as the preferred method (Nicol, 2003:299, 302; Jalland, 2005:15).

The lease for Canberra's first, and also privately owned, crematorium was granted in 1964 to Canberra Crematorium Ltd Inc, beating out H. H. Webb (Australia's largest funeral furnishing supplier at the time) and Frank Heath's (from the Springvale crematorium and a member of the NCPDC, who had planned to design and run the proposed crematorium) proposal (Nicol, 2003:307). The mostly Victorian owned Canberra Crematorium Ltd Inc with Robert Allison as the senior partner (*City News* 12 July 2016) opened their new crematorium in 1966 following a new cremation ordinance that was enacted to govern and licence the new facility (*The Canberra Times* 18 May 1966:4 and 11 July 1966:8). The first cremation took place on 13 July 1966 (*City News* 12 July 2016). The original building, completed at the cost of \$130,000, was designed by the Melbourne architectural practice of Rosman Hastings & Sorel Pty Ltd with Peter Sorel, one of the Canberra Crematorium shareholders/directors, as partner in charge of the design (AIA, 2014).

During its first few years of operation, Norwood Park ran at a loss while Canberrans, who until this time had only buried their loved ones, started to get used to the idea of cremation services. The Canberra Crematorium Ltd directors noted in their 1968 report that, "the percentage of cremations to burials is not yet equal to...older settled areas" but that there was an increase in patronage in every successive year (*The Canberra Times* 26 March 1968:16). In 1985, Norwood Park was performing about sixteen cremations a day (*The Canberra Times* 9 January, 1985:1) and by 2016 had conducted over 46,200 cremations (*City News*, 12 July 2016). Currently the cremation rate for the ACT is around 75%, which would equate to almost five cremations per day (based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017 data), most of which would be performed at the ACT's only facility, Norwood Park Crematorium.

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Figure 1 (below) State Library of Victoria of Norwood Park Crematorium Gungahlin, Barton Highway. Canberra. A.C.T. Rosman, Hastings & Sorel 1967-68 - H91.244-4358



Although the building has been designed to separate the public side of the crematorium from the procedural areas where the cremations are actually carried out, there have been instances where mourners have witnessed dark smoke coming from a previous cremation service. This is generally thought to be the result of certain finishes on caskets and advances in technology and administrative procedures has eliminated this problem at Norwood Park (e.g. *The Canberra Times* 31 July 1979:3).

The Building

The building was entered in the 1968 Royal Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter) Awards where it was awarded the Canberra Medallion – the highest award given for a non-residential building. The building beat 24 entries, including landmark buildings such as the National Library, the Prudential Insurance Building, London Circuit, and a new chapel at RMC Duntroon. The jury citation said the building was:

“...on a superb site with a magnificent outlook and made a very direct and simple statement of the elements of a crematorium. The flanking walls, the pools, and the courtyards have been most sensitively used to create an atmosphere suitable to this building.”

In 1997 the building was presented with the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (ACT Chapter) 25 Year Award for Sustained Architectural Excellence.

The administration building, located on the western side of the driveway from the main complex, was also designed by Rosman Hastings & Sorel in 1973 and extended in 1992 by architects Leith Bartlett Pty. Ltd. The Condolence Pavilion, added as an east wing to the main crematorium building, was designed by Freeman Leeson Architects Pty.

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Ltd in 2000.

Changes to the Site Over Time

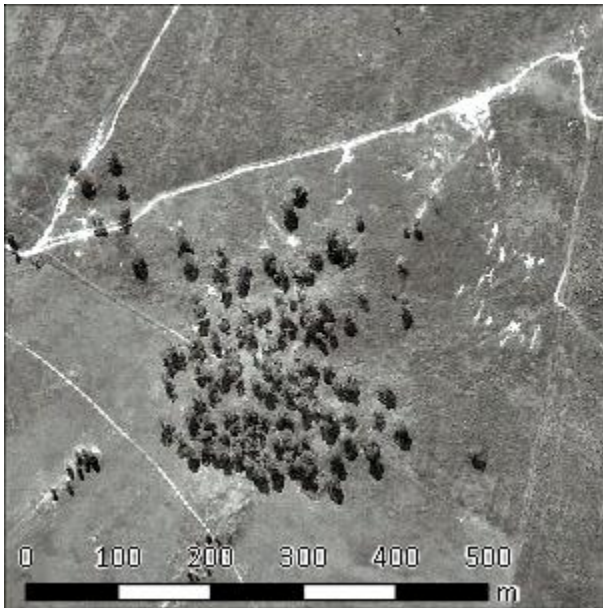


Figure 2 1961 – stand of trees on the edge of town near to the Gungahlin Homestead



Figure 3 1968 Crematorium has been built with the Gungahlin Homestead road being extended out from the Barton Highway



Figure 4 1975 – the landscaping is developing with bordering hedges and more consolidated roads that now extend out to Mitchell which has just starting developing. The Administration Building has been added and the Gungahlin Cemetery is developing to the north



Figure 5 1986 – minor landscaping developments

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Figure 6 1995 – the landscaping in the southeast corner starts to be developed and the Administration Building has expanded.



Figure 8 2005 – the Condolence Pavilion (2000) has been built and the landscaping is starting to spread across to the east and more pathways are expanded to the west of the crematorium. The southwest dam is constructed as well as the east paddock dam and maintenance shed compound built



Figure 7 1998 – Gungahlin Drive has been built, so a new entrance is constructed on the north side along with an expanded carpark and a new entrance for the cemetery across the road.



Figure 9 2009 – more paths and landscaping in the southwest areas

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Figure 10 2012 – landscaping is consolidating and new areas to the east paddock, and an outdoor chapel, is added



Figure 11 2018 - Little significant change has occurred, but there is still plenty of room to expand in the east side of the block

DESCRIPTION

Norwood Park consists of the main crematorium building with its ceremonial and industrial functions, the adjacent condolence chapel, an administrative building and the gardens themselves which have maintenance sheds in the southeast and southwest corners.

Norwood Park Crematorium is on a grassy ridge with scattered eucalypts, many of which predate the building. When first built the site was on the northern outskirts of Canberra, where suburbia had given way to pasture and bushland. The site is now bordered, though not encroached upon, by industrial estates, the Gungahlin Cemetery and Crace and Gungahlin Grasslands nature reserves which serve to buffer the site from suburbia.

The site was originally approached from the south via the Barton Highway and Bellenden Street, passing the Gungahlin Homestead. On this original approach visitors swept up the rise through the memorial gardens and circled around the crematorium building to the north facing entry. On leaving was a vista to the city centre, distant visible beyond the rocky outcrop of Crace Hill. The development of Gungahlin Drive and the Gungahlin Cemetery has led to the re-location of the entry to the north side of the complex, connecting to Sandford Street. Whilst being efficient in terms of traffic management, the visitor's understanding of the building's siting in the original design intent has been lost.

The main building is located at the top of a grassy rise with the gardens falling away on all sides. The driveway provides access to the main carpark on the northern side, before sweeping around the main complex, accessing both the public and industrial facades and then on to the administrative building and the gardens beyond.

Landscaping includes the original mature eucalypts and informal arrangements of Australian native plantings. The landscaping of the surrounding memorial gardens also has areas of more formal groupings of exotic species, interspersed with memorial walls, commemorative plaques and statuary.

In describing the building in *The Canberra Times* (6 November 1997) Caroline Roberts wrote:

"A crematorium building is required to provide for two diverse uses. It must receive the public with discretion and dignity and provide a setting for the funeral service that is familiarly ecclesiastical yet appropriate for all creeds. It must also accommodate the purely industrial operation of the cremation."

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The plan of the building resolves this dual function simply and effectively. Of soft brown face brick, a thick spine wall bisects the crown of the hill in an east west direction. Forward of this, facing out to the north in a roughly cruciform shape are set the public spaces including porte cochere, entry lobby, main chapel and flanking courtyards. Behind the wall, and set down half a level are the cremation facilities concealed from public view.

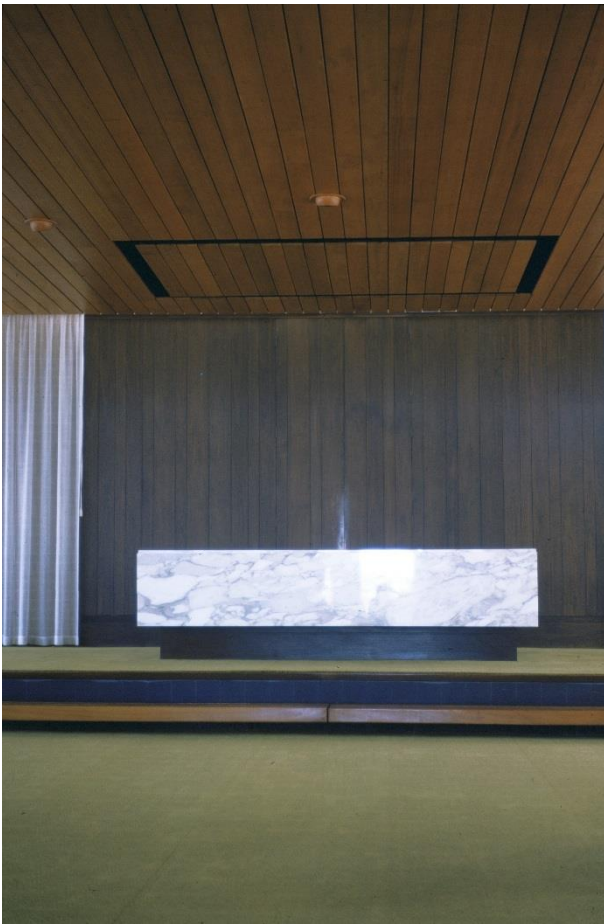


Figure 12 (left) and Figure 13 (right). Norwood Park Crematorium Gungahlin, Barton Highway. Canberra. A.C.T. Rosman, Hastings & Sorel 1967-68 (Peter Willie from the State Library of Victoria H91.244-4365 and 4366)

The chapel is an arrangement of vertical and horizontal planes. A flat roof with deep sawn Oregon fascia comes out from the main spine wall and extends out to the porte cochere on steel posts. A secondary brown face brick blade wall with frameless glass highlights makes up the entry and extends out from each side of the roof plane to partly enclose the flanking courts.

The front wall has large sliding doors, originally of embossed copper but now replaced with copper paint effect. A small lobby, with vestry and utility space to each side, leads into the chapel. This main space is fully glazed on three sides with large glass doors leading to the entry lobby and flanking courtyards. The rear wall is panelled in American Walnut and is a backdrop for the stone clad catafalque, from which coffins are discretely lowered to the crematorium. The ceiling is lined with clear finished spaced timber boards. The carpet is a rich red. Glazed walls are covered in white sheer curtains.

The interior was designed to create a feeling of serenity, space and light with its close relationship with the flanking courts. Each of the courts has a memorial pool set against the brick spine wall. They provide overflow space for the congregation and a focus for quiet contemplation.

The Condolence Chapel, designed by Freeman Leeson Architects Pty. Ltd. was built in 2000 and provides a multipurpose space including small kitchenette. The building is located on the far side of the eastern courtyard and is set slightly lower than the main chapel. Although obviously a contemporary building it reflects the main elements of the original including masonry blade walls, flat roof with prominent timber fascia, and large glazed doors leading to a semi enclosed courtyard space. The building was designed to be subservient and complimentary to the original design,

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although the northern façade wall has been painted in a mural which makes it more obvious than the previous flat grey rendered surface.

The administration building, also by Rosman Hastings & Sorel Pty. Ltd was built several years after the main building. It uses a similar palette of materials – brown face brick, flat roofs, large areas of timber framed glazing but is a small building on a more domestic scale.

Degree of Intactness

The original building is reasonably intact, with most modifications being cosmetic and reversible. The following changes were observed on inspection in February 2019.

Exterior

- Trim work including natural stained sawn Oregon fascia boards and steel posts have been painted a beige colour. This detracts from the original intent of natural finishes.
- The copper effect cladding on the main entry door needs repair
- Clear finished timber board soffit linings have been painted with a timber colour finish.
- Both courtyards have been modified, including paving in lieu of original gravel, decommissioning of original water features, construction of new cascading water features and replacement of slate copings with bull nosed beige terracotta copings. Shade sails have also been installed to provide shelter for overflow from the chapel. The new details are Mediterranean in style and detract from the original more simply detailed use of natural materials.
- The grounds have been extensively modified to suit the changing needs of the facility. The changes do not detract from the original building, but does alter the landscape setting from the original natural informal landscaping to more areas of formal landscaping.

Interior

- The eastern end of the entry lobby has been partitioned to form a utility space. This balances the existing vestry on the western side and is complimentary.
- The glass wall that created the entrance lobby vestibule has been removed to create more space for mourners.
- The clear finished American Walnut panelling has been painted a beige colour. This detracts from the original intent of natural finishes.
- The clear finished American Walnut panelling behind the dais and catafalque has been removed, revealing a white, recessed doorway and the sheer white curtains replaced with a dark brown curtain that detracts from the design intent of a dark natural finish on a flat rear wall (which original incorporated a hidden doorway) to make the catafalque and coffin a clear focus of the audience.
- The original white marble of the catafalque has been reclad in a black marble that detracts from the original design that echoed the floating appearance used for the ceiling.
- The original forest green carpet has been replaced with beige on the dais and a dark-brown/maroon patterned carpet below.
- Various free-standing items such as wrought iron flower stands etc. have been introduced.

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SITE PLAN



Image 1 Norwood Park Crematorium site boundary

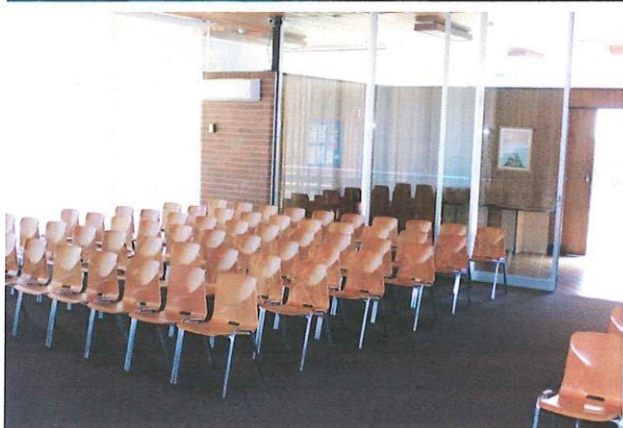
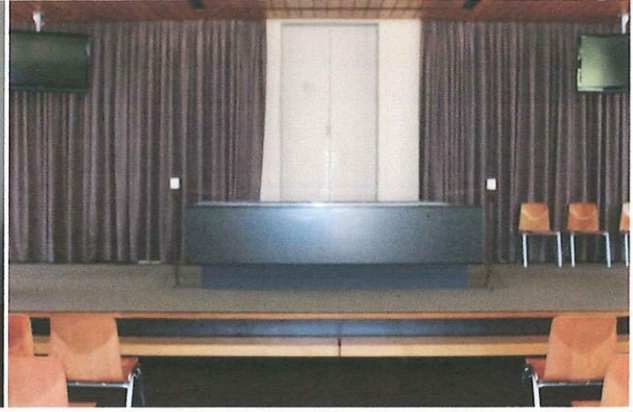
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IMAGES



NORWOOD PARK CREMATORIUM CHAPEL
Photographs by Ken Charlton, 12 September 2014

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – NORWOOD PARK CREMATORIUM



NORWOOD PARK CREMATORIUM CHAPEL
Photographs by Linda Ambrosiussen, 4 November 2014

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