



ACT Heritage Council

BACKGROUND INFORMATION BELCONNEN LIBRARY AND PEDESTRIAN PLAZA (BLOCKS 11, 12, 22, AND 38 SECTION 54, BELCONNEN)

At its meeting of 10 February 2022 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Belconnen Library and Pedestrian Plaza was eligible for provisional registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Belconnen Library and Pedestrian Plaza against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.



Figure 1 Belconnen Library from Chandler Street – view from Northeast corner (ACT Heritage, 2020)

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HISTORY

“...[the] NCDC [National Capital Development Commission] conceived [Belconnen] as more than a place for regional shopping with sites for service trades and major government offices. It wanted to create "a place for living, for leisure and for people" with 24-hour activity and the NCDC literature had a rare sparkle as it alluded to a water's edge entertainment sector where markets, taverns, cinemas, boat hires, ice-skating and the like would contribute to "a bright and lively atmosphere." To achieve this vitality the NCDC proposed, in another departure from Woden, to blend shopping, commercial and community facilities - such as a mix of cafe, savings bank and boutique with library, child care and post office and bring more than 10,000 permanent residents into the heart of the town...”¹

Sparke 1987:181

The NCDC published *The Future Canberra* in 1965, outlining its plan to expand the city to accommodate 250,000 people by 1980; expanding into the Districts of Belconnen and Woden with future possible expansions into Weston Creek, Tuggeranong, Jerrabomberra Majura and Gungahlin – each capable of housing 50,000 to 100,000 people. The Districts were meant to be relatively self-contained while supporting the central City area and functions. These Districts would then be divided into neighbourhoods (or suburbs, although technically referred to as “Divisions”) of about 4,000 centred around a small shop and school. There would also be larger centres based on the catchment of three or four neighbourhoods around a larger shopping centre and high school². After the plan was published the NCDC made quick ground in establishing Woden and Belconnen, but before they were complete, the plan was reassessed in *Tomorrow's Canberra* in 1970.

The NCDC's Y-plan spread Canberra's development into a series of decentralised towns with populations between 100,000 to 200,000 with Civic remaining as the dominant centre. After planning for Woden, Belconnen was the next town centre to be developed with a planned population of 120,000 people; however lower growth than expected occurred and a review of the Belconnen plan in 1982 projected a population of only 87,200, along with private development occurring differently to what had been planned, lead to a major redesign in 1986³.

In 1970, a pattern of dispersed employment areas, particularly in the new districts of Woden and Belconnen, was developing through the NCDC's planning and allocation of land and building program⁴. “The town centre will be the most important centre in each town. It will serve as a neighbourhood centre for the adjoining higher density housing, a group centre for the adjoining neighbourhoods, and a comparison shopping, social, recreation, and cultural centre for the whole town. It will also be an important employment area as it will contain a large complex of government offices.”⁵ It was also noted that they will be pedestrian focused and slow to develop and, as such, can change character over time, so it was considered important for the NCDC to control building form and location.

The Belconnen Town Centre core area was intended to be a closely integrated conglomeration of commercial residential and cultural facilities. “In keeping with the general concept on which the planning of Canberra's town centre is based, there will be a variety of inter-related activities in the core area of Belconnen Town Centre, such as the retail mall, the bus interchange, government and private offices, a library and health centre”⁶ was the promise of the day; however this is not how it developed.

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Figure 2 The NCD's Y-Plan from *Tomorrow's Canberra* (p.226)

The greatest impact to the plan was by the mall being built on the other side of Benjamin Way, splitting off one of the biggest drawcards and cohesive agents. After this, there seemed to be a period of planning catch-up being played where the NCD tried its best to make do with what it had been dealt, while also trying to appease all the other interested parties who had developed their own plans based on the previously announced plans that never played out. Of interest was mention early on that Benjamin Way was meant to be a peripheral road to the core area, so it was not planned to be crossed often by pedestrians and also explains the pedestrian plaza and walking routes that existed around the Library site that no longer (or rather, never) function[ed] the way they were intended⁷; but the way the area has developed now has Benjamin Way as the main street⁸.

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6.21 Belconnen Town Centre: design principles

Legend

-  Pedestrian Plaza
-  Development Areas
-  Open Space
-  Parking
-  Pedestrian Movement
-  Vehicular Movement
-  Possible Route for Public Transport

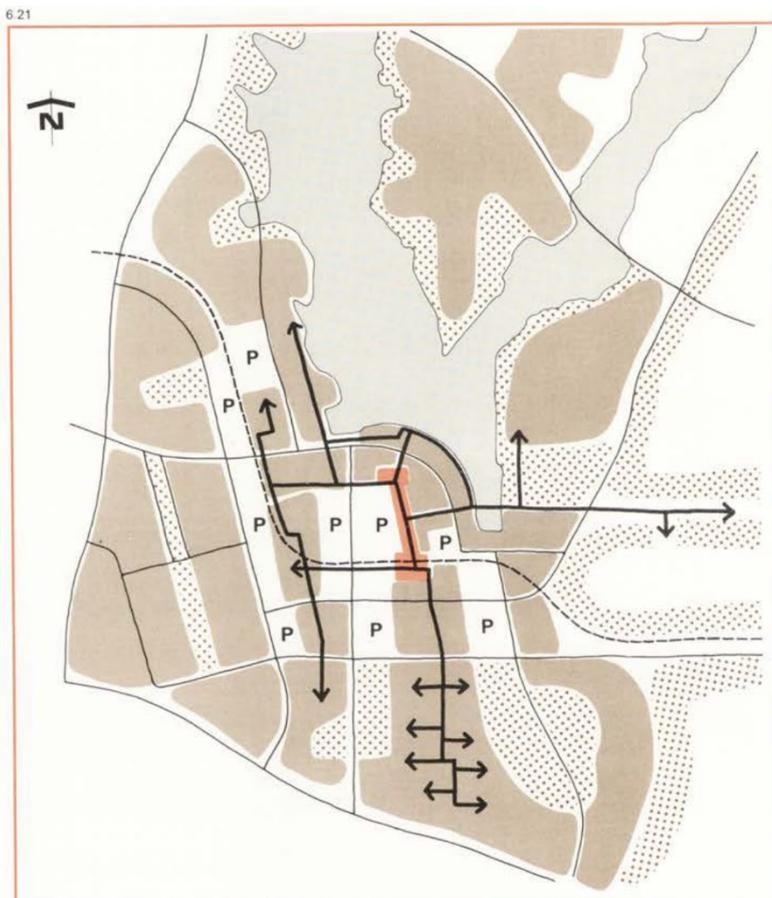


Figure 3 Belconnen Town Centre design principles from the NDC's *Tomorrow's Canberra* p.102

The Library

The Cameron Offices were the first major buildings to be constructed in Belconnen. They formed an integral part of the original town plan in which the aim was to provide a relatively compact pedestrian-oriented town centre on a north south axis following the slope of the land, from housing to the south through the Cameron Offices area, transport interchange and shopping centre on the manmade Lake Ginninderra, which was to have a mix of cultural buildings and housing along its shore.⁹

As a part of this plan the Belconnen Library would have been located at the centre of a pedestrian-centric town, connected to the mall and other services by close proximity and even overhead walkways. The proposed connections and massing of built features can be seen in Figure 3 and was a key aspect of the architect's planning of the library and associated plaza which was supposed to be surrounded by commercial developments as the architect noted in their report to the NDC "The relationship of the planned pedestrian walkway, the position of the Revival Centre and the two-storied portion of the library housing the Community area affords the opportunity of creating a pivotal point to the Plaza design. This concept is reinforced with the positioning of the curved wall to the Library and the placement of the circular column on the extreme corner of the site. The increased height of this two-storied area and the opening of the wall into a balcony for the Community area emphasises the spatial effect at this junction. This pivotal point generating from the column will mark the change of direction of the pedestrian walkways and establish the entry link between the Plaza spaces. The increased height of the two-storied area is located so as to form a link between the commercial development zone and the Revival Centre. Similarly, the increased height of the wall to the clearstorey[sic] areas will create a visual bulk to the building from the urban design viewpoint when viewed from the distance."¹⁰

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The proposed Belconnen Mall was a pivotal part of the NCDC's planning for the area, serving as an anchor site to attract and concentrate people in the area. The Mall was being developed by the Canberra Commercial Development Authority (CCDA), which was set up under the *Canberra Commercial Development Authority Ordinance 1974* specifically to build and run the Mall, including related community facilities, as a commercial entity with profits being returned to the government for the benefit of the community. The CCDA did not always see eye-to-eye with the NCDC who had envisioned a large shopping centre located on section 54 in close proximity to other planned services, such as the library, and connected to their other major projects, such as the Cameron Offices. The CCDA, on the other hand envisioned a centre twice as large that would not fit in section 54 along with all the required parking and the rest of the NCDC's planned core area facilities. The CCDA pushed to have their shopping centre to the west of Benjamin Way with a larger footprint, while the NCDC tried to keep them in section 54 and a much smaller building. Eventually the CCDA convinced the NCDC that a multi-stage approach, starting in their preferred location on the west of Benjamin Way and eventually building over it, was the way to go. None of the parties must have been very serious about this plan because it appears to have been abandoned by 1978.

In a file note from Mr John Paynter 14 August 1974 he notes, "...I believe the Commission should take the view that a major library facility is a fundamental element of community infrastructure and a basic requirement of any town centre serving a population in the order of 100,000 plus." The F.A.C.A. also commented that a library would be important as a community facility, "...would generate pedestrian movement throughout the day..."

At several points in the NCDC file #78/1721 it is noted that the library site was considered a major location in the Town Centre planning and that it was undesirable to leave it vacant between the mall opening up in 1977 to when the library was intended to open in 1980-81, but it was still important enough to reserve the site. Other parts of Section 54 were considered, such as the corner of Chandler St and Benjamin Way (the current entrance of Margaret Timpson Park) – this was agreed on in principle in a planning committee meeting in March 1978 and the library committee also agreed. A minute paper from H. L. Westerman on 4 April 1978 noted a discussion with the Minister that all were happy for this to proceed, but that he anticipated objections from Mr Pead as Chairman of the CCDA (Canberra Commercial Development Authority that was set up to build and run the mall) that this would result in a smaller footprint for the proposed stage II of the mall that was planned to share Section 54. After more discussions in May 1978, it was noted that the CCDA were not opposed to the Library site, but still had reservations about the amount of space they would require (they suggested 20,000m² while the NCDC was thinking closer to 10,000m²) and there was talk within the NCDC of nudging the library to an alternate site to avoid souring relations with the CCDA. By September 1978, there were new NCDC policies [i.e. they came up with a way to make it seem like it was a better idea for the library to decide to move rather than force their hand] for the Belconnen Core Area that wanted three stories along Benjamin Way and presented other benefits for the library to relocate closer to the Bus Interchange (e.g. a proposed diagonal pedestrian link, the release of adjacent sites for commercial development, new parking and service access, possible basement parking at the new site and allowing a single storey building) as shown in Figure 5. 25 October 1978 Martin Jones wrote a minute paper to Hans Westerman (cc Jacques Robertson) noting the preliminary results of the library survey of users that led to a preference for a site that was adjacent to Benjamin Way was preferable as the majority of users were linked in some way to the town centre/mall.

By 1986 the town plan had changed in response to circumstances¹¹. The core of the town centre had become more spread out as the mall moved to the western side of Benjamin way, rather than taking up most of Section 54 and abutting the Library. Concerns about the change were raised in an 25 June 1979 letter from Rev. R. J. Kirkwood from the Canberra Revival Centre to Minister for the Capital Territory R. J. Ellicot objecting to the changes in planning for the Belconnen Town Centre as totally changing the focus of the core area away from Section 54 as previously planned, noting that the library would not create a lively pedestrian plaza or be conducive to commercial activity in the area (which they had built into their church based on the previous NCDC advice). Following this was a series of internal memos and notes defending the NCDC's position and espousing the design benefits of the Library – essentially, defending a position they

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had already taken and were not willing to open up again. This was reaffirmed in the Department's letter they drafted as a response from the Minister to the Reverend suggesting that the changes will not fundamentally change the prospects of the area, the flow through traffic and the activity of the plaza.

This resulted in poor pedestrian linkages and parking for the Library and the disjointed layout of the different functions around the core meant that it was less likely for people to utilise secondary destinations and, "in the case of the libraries it appears that Belconnen has a lower level of utilisation than the Woden facility. This is because it is removed from the mall and people are more inclined to make a separate trip from their home for this purpose"¹² a situation that still affects the full utilisation of the Library as noted in the 2018 Standing Committee inquiry into ACT Libraries¹³. This is illustrated shortly after the library was opened during a 2CA radio talkback segment on 25 September 1981 in which a caller noted her trouble in locating the entrance to the library as it pointed away from the path from the mall and confusion amongst people she asked where it was¹⁴.

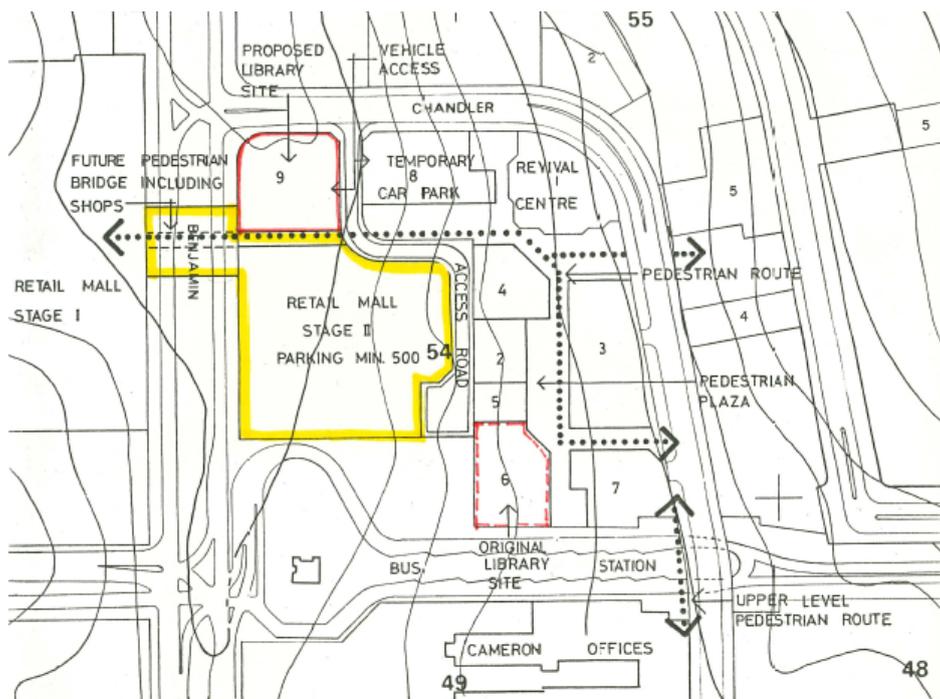


Figure 4 the 18 April 1978 suggested new site for the library, including the original planned location of the mall and the pedestrian routes throughout.

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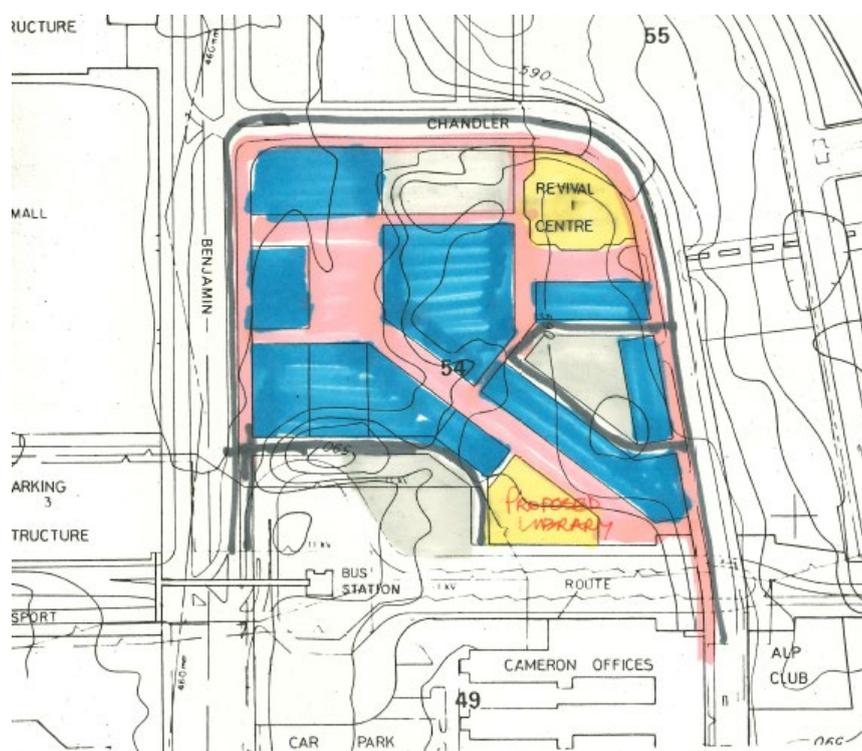


Figure 5 In a meeting with the CPLS on 25 September 1978 the plan had changed again with a much improved pedestrian layout with better access to the bus station and the Cameron Offices while being located along the route to the mall.

The Plaza

The purpose of the Plaza was to create a place that helped people enjoy the area in line with the purpose of the surrounding buildings while reinforcing the NCD's plans for pedestrian movement in and through the space. So to design the Plaza, Gibson had to take into account the existing Revival Centre, the Library (which he was also designing) and a proposed future commercial development (which ended up being a seniors centre). Of interest is that the existing carpark to the west was considered adequate and so only pedestrian access – coming from the carpark, the residential area along Chandler Street, the bus terminal and the Cameron Offices – was to be accounted for. A large elm tree was to be retained and walkways were to have a maximum of covered areas. Gibson even added a small amphitheatre protected from north-west winds for small performances. Gibson used a system of stair, walkways and ramps to guide articulation in and through the plaza, carefully aligned to avoid areas of congregation that could be adversely affected by noise of passers-by. It was recognised that a wind tunnel effect could occur and strategies, such as lowering the Plaza and dense planting immediately north of the library, were developed to minimise this impact. It was also noted that all levels of the plaza were below the library, allowing for adequate drainage, even in extreme weather events. The landscape architect for the Plaza was Barbara van den Broek.¹⁵

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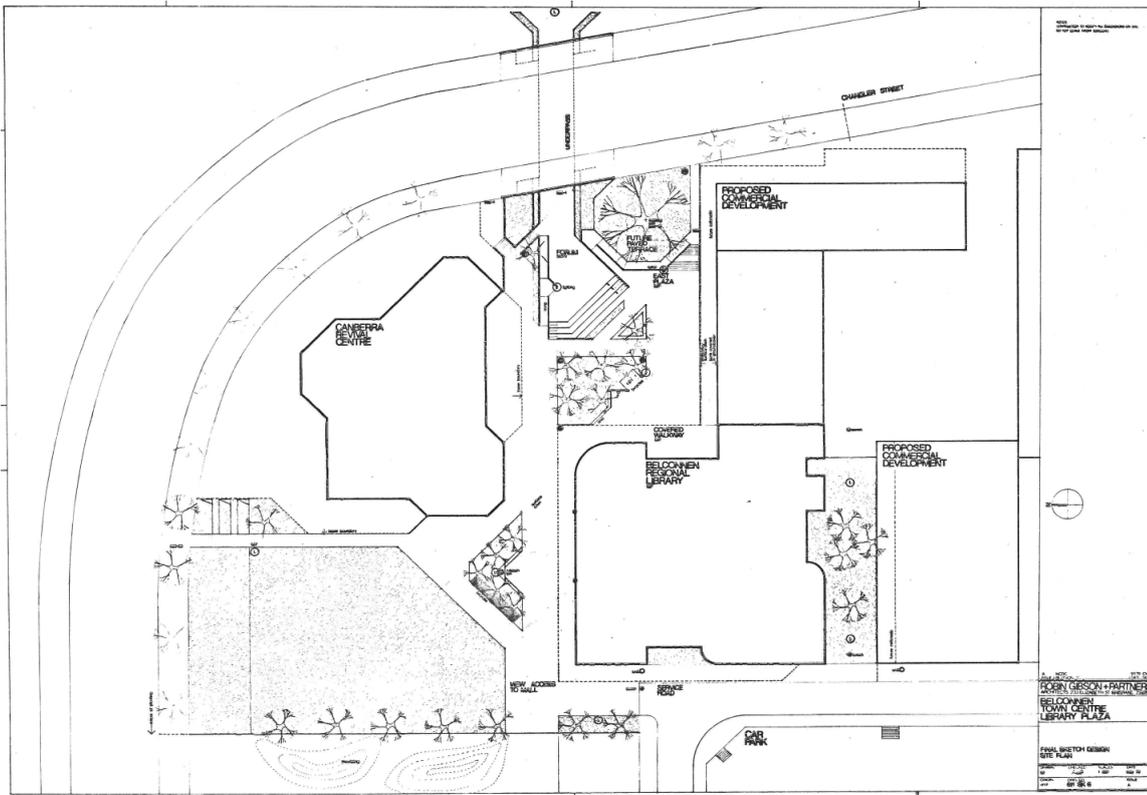


Figure 6 Plaza design from Robin Gibson & Partners Architects (1979) Belconnen Town Centre Plaza Report. Report commissioned for the NDC, Canberra.



Figure 7 Concept illustration from Robin Gibson & Partners Architects (1979) Belconnen Town Centre Plaza Report. Report commissioned for the NDC, Canberra.

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Figure 8 Concept illustration from Robin Gibson & Partners Architects (1979) Belconnen Town Centre Plaza Report. Report commissioned for the NCDC, Canberra.

Table 1 Timeline for the Belconnen Library

15 November 1978	Draft policy plan for S54 including the site boundary and development plans for the library
29 November 1978	Brief issued to Robin Gibson and Partners
13 December 1978	Draft policy plan and draft development plan now includes the plaza
17 January 1979	Brief for the plaza issued to Robin Gibson and Partners
27 June 1979	Plaza and Library projects amalgamated with an upper cost limit of \$1,552,000
26 March 1979	Preliminary sketch plans for the Library approved
27 March 1979	Preliminary sketch plans for the Plaza approved
18 May 1979	Final sketch plans for the Plaza approved
22 May 1979	Final sketch plans for the Library approved
November 1979	The final plans included amendments required by the client (i.e. CPLS) including sliding airlock doors

The design of the Library

In a 24 June 1977 Minute Paper from Paul Reid to Tony Powell an architectural competition is suggested as the Library was considered fairly simple and small enough in scope to attract any architect and it was noted that, "...the site is an important one in the Belconnen Town Centre and the building plays a significant role in the community affairs."

The design selection exercise was narrowed down to six architectural firms to submit for the library project:

1. Cheeseman, Doley, Neighbour and Raffan
2. Eggleston MacDonald
3. Collard, Clarke and Jackson
4. Robin Gibson
5. Robert Dickson and Associates Pty Ltd
6. Neil Renfree in association with Holford and Partners

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However, as there were delays and the site was not yet fixed, it was decided in January 1978 that rather than a competition the Architectural Division within the Commission would simply select a preferred architect from the list, in this case it was decided to go with Robin Gibson who was sent a proposal on 29 November 1978.

The Belconnen Town Centre Library Urban Design Guidelines included in NCDC file #78/1721 specified, among others, the following important conditions:

- The library may fully cover the site, but the below colonnades must abut the boundaries
- 3m covered walkways on the north and east sides must be available as part of the plaza and may be cantilevered, although “...treating the walkway as a colonnade...is strongly preferred.”
- The form of the building should reinforce that of the Cameron Offices; i.e. simple and geometric with a horizontal aspect, while also respecting the visual linkages with the Revival Centre (including the same colour and tone). The materials could match the brick of the Revival Centre, but a monolithic treatment was preferred.
- Visual linkages from the plaza to the interior of the library should be considered, with clear glass recommended.
- The design should also express the library as a termination point in the pedestrian routes

Following comments from CPLS the design was changed to keep children’s and adult’s services on the same floor as well as several other issues; the preliminary plan was recommended to be accepted in March 1979 following a meeting of the CPLS committee. This was mostly a case of how well all the internal features and activity areas worked together and were inter-related. It was also during this meeting that it was noted that the revolving doors would be replaced and the location of the entrance was questioned, particularly if it could be moved to the west closer to the mall if things didn’t work out as expected – the answer was that weather and pedestrian modelling suggested that the east entrance was still best and that it served the Chandler Street parking and CCAE students. There were also concerns over the double height entry and the service desk there, particularly lighting and also the suitability of the building to be extended in the future. The architect resolved these issues with some minor modifications, which were easily accommodated by the relatively open floorplan of the building; a feature that has served it well over time as library services have changed with new technologies and changing layouts varying drastically yet have been relatively easy to accommodate.

Built on the site of the former Emu Bank homestead, the Belconnen Library was located north of the then recently completed Cameron Office and near the Belconnen Bus Interchange. The Library was opened by Sir Zelman Cowan, Governor-General of Australia, in September 1981.¹⁶

The Library features a small collection of art, both permanent and on temporary display. The foyer has a display area for temporary displays but is mostly used for showcasing books. In early 1988 a ceramic tile mural, *Horizon* (although noted by *The Canberra Times* as being called *My Country* when it was unveiled), by Sally Cleary was installed on the bulkhead above the loans desk; however, this appears to have been built over and the status of the mural is currently unknown.

The National Capital Development Commission supported the ACT Crafts Council in their application for an Australian Bicentenary Authority grant to commission a mural for the Belconnen Library. The work is *Horizon 1*, a ceramic mosaic created by Sally Cleary. Mr John Langmore, Member for Fraser on Friday 29 January 1988, unveiled it¹⁷. The artwork was installed on the west bulkhead on the double height foyer, which has since been covered. It is unknown if the artwork remains hidden behind the wood panel or was removed.

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Figure 9 *Horizon* by Sally Cleary (<https://www.sallycleary.com/Architectural-Ceramics-1988-2000>)

In 2001, a set of five panels of screen printed ceramic tiles showing everyday life of Canberrans was created by Wellspring Environment Arts & Design. The five panels were located in each of the five main valleys of Canberra, with one of the panels installed on the curved outer wall of the Library.

The community room has hosted regular community groups, such as mothers groups or gaming groups. The community room has recently been closed during the 2020-21 COVID-19 restrictions and has been used as a storage area until it can be safely reinstated, currently slated for later in 2021. Other changes include the rear door for the elevator being decommissioned (still in-situ). The report from the architect¹⁸ states that the purpose of the building is to serve as a cultural information and community centre...by providing appropriate facilities that the library will encourage all groups of the community to utilise them and create further awareness of activities within the community” and that in “...answering of these functional needs of the library’s activities together with those of the community is inherent in the development of the architecture for the Belconnen Town Centre Library.”



Figure 10 Scale model of the Belconnen Town Library on display at the Belconnen Mall (ACT Heritage Library ref#002668 and #002669)

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It is also worth noting that the Library was designed in consultation with representative groups¹⁹ and the scale model of the building was on display in the mall as part of the public consultation (Figure 10).

The Library was awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion in 1982, which is the highest award presented by the Chapter for architectural excellence to the best recent building. In 1982 the jury for the RAIA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion stated: "It is a very human building; a building for people. It has a scale and personality that is totally in key with the needs of a community facility; it has succeeded in providing a setting where young and old can feel comfortable and a sense that the building is part of their community. Whilst the building is restrained in its expression of form and space it is exquisite in its detailing and use of materials. The concrete work is very refined and the use of glass is masterful."²⁰ With the judging panel continuing to say that it "...had a sense of comfort and composure and did not try to over-compensate for its modest proportions and difficult location." In particular, the problem of the incomplete Belconnen Town Centre Master Plan was thought would be addressed in the future by new buildings and landscaping filling out the area over time. The judges commented several times about how the building addressed community needs and how well all the respective pieces of the design were laid out and worked together.²¹ The Library also received the Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter 25 Year Award for Enduring Architecture in 2010.

Comparisons with other Canberra libraries

In March 1974, the first Library of the Belconnen district was opened in the Canberra College of Advanced Education (Now Canberra University) followed by the Kippax 'temporary' Public Library in transportable buildings in October 1978.²²

The National Library of Australia's (NLA) 1979 annual report noted that, "The function of the Canberra Public Library Service (CPLS) is to provide a public lending library service for Canberra through a central library and suburban branches. A new branch library, with a capacity for 15,000 volumes, was opened at Kippax in July to serve the residents of north-west Belconnen. It is housed in a portable building which will eventually be replaced by a permanent building on an adjoining site. Planning began during the year for the Belconnen Town Centre Library... It is expected that the library will be completed in 1981 to serve a population of 62,000."²³ However, by 1981 the CPLS had been separated out from the national institution to become its own local library system.

During 1979 an inter-departmental committee was formed to discuss the future of the CPLS as the NLA saw it as an anachronistic service against its national-level charter. The committee, "...recommended that the CPLS be transferred to the Department of the Capital Territory, that the CPLS Advisory Committee become a committee advising the Minister for the Capital Territory, and that the transfer of functions take place on 1 July 1981."²⁴ On 1 July the CPLS officially split from the NLA and came under the control of the Department of the Capital – Legislation and Policy Co-ordination Division; however, it was essentially independent under the control of the Canberra Public Librarian with guidance from the CPLS Committee and had access to the Minister via the Secretary of the Department of the Capital Territory²⁵. Since then the name has changed to reflect changing functions within the service; first to the ACT Library and Information Service in 2000, and then to its current name, Libraries ACT, in 2011²⁶.

As of 2021 there are nine branches of Libraries ACT: Dickson (opened in 1969), Woden (1977), Belconnen (1981), Erindale (1983), Tuggeranong (1990), Kippax (2005), Civic (2006 – although it had existed in several locations in the City starting in the North Building in 1961), Kingston (2009) and Gungahlin (2011). The current picture does not capture the full history of libraries in the ACT, which date back to St John's Schoolhouse in 1855 and the first public library, based on the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, starting in 1927.²⁷

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The most directly comparable place is the Woden Library as it is from the same period in the ACT's development and also a contemporary modernist design, also to a lesser extent is the Dickson Library which was the first of the ACT's modern libraries, but it was not an extension into a new town centre as part of the Y-Plan. Some comparison can also be made to the NLA as the original parent institution for the mid-century Canberra libraries, however for the same reasons that the NLA divested itself of the CPLS, i.e. it has a different purpose, this is just for context in terms of the scales of service provided. While the Belconnen Library was counted among the ACT's best performing libraries²⁸, considering its catchment, it should be performing at a much higher level similar to Dickson and Woden, but it seems to be hampered by its location and poor connections with other services and facilities²⁹.

“The content of the ACT library collection has changed over time, as new forms of material have become available for borrowing. Fiction books were added to the collection in 1948, and paperbacks included in 1974. In 1975 music listening facilities were introduced (people could listen to records in the library but not take them home), and printed music was loaned from 1977. The library offered spoken word cassettes during the 1980s, initially as a service for people with vision impairment. CDs and DVDs were then included in the collection, and in 2006 eBook and eAudiobook services were introduced.”

(Standing Committee on Environment and Transport And City Services 2018:8)

One of the major technological changes to impact the way the library is used, and importantly how it is designed, was the introduction of computer cataloguing and self-checkout systems. When the Belconnen Library opened in 1981 the catalogue system was computerised, but still required manual input from the librarian, necessitating a large central loans desk; however, much of the process is now automated using Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) technology and more advanced computerised cataloguing and management. Internet access has also had a major impact on library services. It has reduced the need for librarians to be on hand for enquiries and has even replaced some services but has also changed the way the library is used as space and infrastructure was required to provide access to the public, and then the space required was reduced with the proliferation of smart devices. The library service has always been able to adapt to changes in the way libraries are used and what the community want from their local library.³⁰

Robin Gibson³¹

Robert Findlay ('Robin') Gibson was born in Brisbane in 1930, and attended the Yeronga State School and Brisbane State High School.³² He studied Architecture at the University of Queensland, and graduated with a Diploma of Architecture in 1954 (at that time, the diploma was the professional qualification). During his part-time years in university, he worked in a number of architectural offices in Brisbane and, in particular, gained much knowledge from the progressive firm Hayes and Scott. After graduating, Gibson moved to London and worked with the practices of James Cubitt, Sir Hugh Casson and his partner Neville Conder.³³ When Gibson was in London, he travelled across Europe and became interested in modern architecture.

On his return to Brisbane in 1957, Gibson established his own practice. Most of his major projects are in Queensland, with the exception of the Belconnen Library in Canberra, Australian Capital Territory.³⁴

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Robin Findlay Gibson AO LFRAIA ARIBA (1930-2014)

Robin Gibson and Partners was a Brisbane-based architectural practice, formed by Gibson in 1957. In April 1973, it won a two-stage design competition for a new Queensland Art Gallery in South Brisbane. Later, Gibson's commission expanded to the design of the whole of the current Queensland Cultural Centre at South Bank, that also included the Queensland Performing Arts Complex, the Queensland Museum and the State Library of Queensland. The company was registered at the Office of Fair Trading in Queensland in 1994[6], and closed in May 2013, due to Gibson's ill health.³⁵

Gibson's architecture practice was quite diverse in that it undertook a wide range of work including single residential, small retail, industrial and major commercial and civic projects.

The Belconnen Library is one of a number of libraries Gibson has designed, including the libraries at the Universities of Queensland in 1973 and Griffith University in 1975. The Belconnen Library is Gibson's only commission for the NCDC and was designed during a period in Canberra's history when the NCDC were commissioning buildings with the intent to demonstrate the maturity of the city by an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments.

Other notable buildings designed by Gibson include:

- Wheat Silos at Pinkenba, 1969;
- Southern Electricity Authority Control Centre, Belmont, 1977;
- Colonial Mutual Building, Brisbane, 1984;
- Queensland Art Centre, 1985;
- Queensland Museum, 1986; and
- Queensland State Library.³⁶

Gibson was named the 1982 Queenslander of the Year and the following year received an Order of Australia. In 1989, Gibson was awarded the Australian Institute of Architect's Gold Medal. In 2000, the Robin Gibson & Partners received the RAI national Lachlan Macquarie Award for Conservation.³⁷

Gibson died at the age of 83 in March 2014.³⁸

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DESCRIPTION

Belconnen Library, designed by Robin Gibson & Partners for National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in 1980 and constructed in 1981 is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style (1960-) with its Cubiform overall shape, structural frame expressed, large sheets of glass, plain and plain smooth wall surface.³⁹

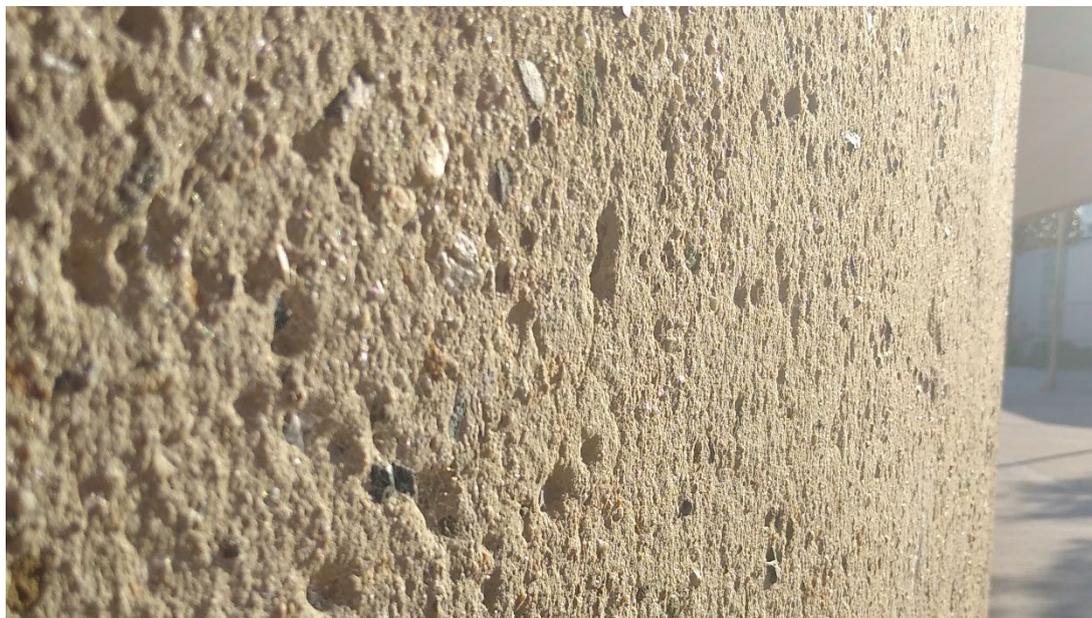


Figure 11 Detail of exposed aggregate sandblasted finish to concrete walls, (ACT Heritage, 2021)

The free-standing library, constructed in off-white in-situ sandblasted, exposed aggregate concrete externally and internally, was designed to be approached from, and appreciated from, all sides in its urban setting. It is primarily approached along the path along its northern façade that connects the mall to the west and the Chandler Street underpass linking to the educational precinct and University to the east. The facias create deep shadows beneath giving emphasis to the horizontal form of the design, while allowing a play of shadow across the curved and recessed surfaces of the lower facades. The soffits creating the flat surface under the eave are lined with flush jointed fibre cement sheets. The glazing throughout is frameless silicon jointed and the full height glazing has a lower sill formed by a low strip of concrete 'kicker' that allows for a continuous skirt.

The entry foyer is a double height space with a generous lobby area around the front counter. The central loans counter has been removed and replaced many times over as new technologies and best library practices are adopted. The foyer remodelling has included unsympathetic timber screening that is not in keeping with the modern aesthetic of the building and has covered, or required to be removed, the Sally Cleary mural *Horizon* (Figure 14). The library is open plan and the external in-situ concrete finish extends to the interior walls. Generally, the book stacks are located towards the centre of the library space allowing the perimeter areas to be set aside for desks, carrels and small reading areas. The original design separated the adult and children's areas with smaller children's area in the southwest corner around the left of the entry. An adult reading area was located to the right of the entry, behind the northwest curved external wall. This space has been had wall partitions installed to create a secure staff area.

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Figure 12 Double height main entry of the Belconnen Library – Eastern façade, (ACT Heritage, 2020)

The western space inside the building is presently used a reading area for periodicals. The western facade has narrow horizontal mid-level slot glazing while eastern light extends into the space from overhead raised recesses with clerestory glazing. Adjacent to the children’s area the spaces that project out towards the southern court have raised ceiling and clerestory glazing similar to the western reading area.



Figure 13 Recess along the southern facade for protected full height glazing, (ACT Heritage, 2020)

The southern and western facades have a continuous fascia under which are recessed sections to allow protected full height glazing with views of the park to the west as well as the southern court. Inside each recess, one side of the return wall is curved, referencing the curve of the north east corner of the library, juxtaposed against the other sides straight planes and right angles. The internal sections of the wall match the curve of the stair and contrast with the overall cubic form of the library.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – BELCONNEN LIBRARY



Figure 14 Double height foyer and the covered bulkhead that held the artwork *Horizon* (ACT Heritage 2021)

Public rest rooms are located adjacent to the entry lobby to service both the library and the upper-level community room. They are approached off the lobby from the library and can also be approached separately off the stair and lift lobby allowing an efficient use of services that can be shared between the Library and the community room or restricted to just the community room entrance for after-hours access.

The structure is set out on a square grid, approximately 45x45 metres, with circular concrete columns supporting the roof framing. The columns are inset from the perimeter fascia except for the northeast corner column that is placed at the external corner for both structural necessity and as a defining design element to the path and library entry. The perimeter columns are placed within the wall along the north façade but are setback from the other facades. The ceiling has a ribbed structure running north-south with the recessed sections housing the air circulation ducting as well as up lighting that reflects down into the interior with a diffuse soft light (see Figure 15).

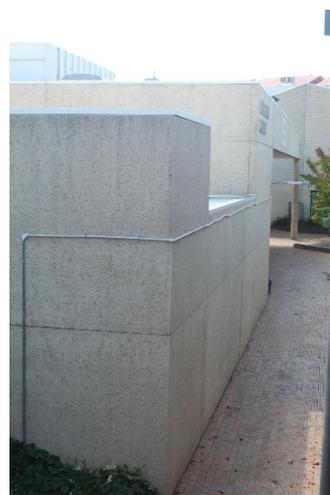
As well as normal 'town' library functions, the building was designed to serve the community, including information and referral services and facilities for community activities with a meeting room on the upper level.

The building is two-storey at the northeast corner to accommodate the community room. The upper-level community room is accessed from the stairs or lift located to the left of the library main entry, then a bridge takes you over the top to the right of the library entrance. This provides an interesting promenade as well as out of hours security. The path has a stainless-steel balustrade along the outer side, while full height glazing along the library side allows a view back down into the library foyer. The railing was extended to full height with a complimentary vertical railing that is continued along the curved glass railing on the corner. The community meeting room has been given added interest with curved concrete walls and ribbon frameless glazing enabling extensive views to the north. A kitchenette is set to one side.

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Figure 15 Belconnen Library interior, showing the open plan and ribbed ceiling with ducting and lights (ACT Heritage, 2021)



Figures 16, 17 modifications to the restroom area have left their mark, **Figure 18** intrusive external conduit and floodlighting

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Figure 19 Integration of the surrounding environment with the building structure – Northeast, (ACT Heritage, 2020)



Figure 20 Southeast light well with clerestory windows (ACT Heritage, 2021); **21** Northwest light well with clerestory windows (ACT Heritage, 2021)

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While it does have some affinities with the Brutalist style of architecture, the Library identifies most strongly with the Late Twentieth Century International Style of architecture as defined by Apperly et al. Indeed, the design brief specified that the building had to compliment the Brutalist style Cameron Offices, however, Gibson's design has a lighter touch. Architectural elements of the Late Twentieth-Century International Style displayed by the building include⁴⁰:

- Broad characteristics
 - Mostly used for commercial and institutional buildings – yes, library/public building
 - Greater sculptural quality than earlier International styles – yes, includes curving surfaces juxtaposed with right angle, blocky forms and round columns
 - Increasing use of curvilinear forms – yes, as above
 - Reinforced concrete members used expressively in response to structural forces - no
 - High-quality 'traditional' materials – no, concrete used rather than stone, tile, wood etc.
- Settings and relationship
 - Precision – yes, high quality finish, particularly soffits and edges of panels where concrete edges meet
 - Sharpness – yes, as above
 - Transparency – yes, glass entrance and large glass sections along all walls provide surprisingly clear and open viewing in and out
 - Spatial quality considered appropriate to urban settings – yes, low horizontal emphasis and close design with surrounding landscape allows the building to fit in to its surroundings
- Exterior characteristics:
 - Cubiform overall shapes often complemented by contrasting non-rectangular shapers and plain smooth wall surfaces – yes, the whole is 45x45m square in which rectangular roof elements are used along with round columns and curving wall segments for select corners and to create niches along the facades that are juxtaposed with angular returns
 - Structural frame expressed - no
 - Curtain walls and large areas of glazing complemented by contrasting textures – no, does not include curtain walls and uses simple smooth textures of concrete and glass
 - Cantilevered forms – yes, 3m cantilever on north and west facades and entrance
 - Overhangs and external sun control devices integrated in design – yes, 3m roof cantilever and again with the community room roof cantilever
- Structure and construction
 - Steel and reinforced concrete frame promoted great height besides supporting glass curtain walls – partial, uses steel and reinforced concrete, but urban setting required lower height and uses frameless glazing set in concrete walls
 - Use of pre- and post-tensioning facilitated dramatic and attenuated forms - no
- Other qualities
 - Eschews historicism – yes, thoroughly modern design, no reference to classical forms or decoration

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Figure 22 Pedestrian Plaza from Chandler Street facing the Belconnen Library (ACT Heritage, 2020)



Figure 23 Pedestrian Plaza from Chandler Street facing the Belconnen Library (ACT Heritage, 2020)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION – BELCONNEN LIBRARY

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⁴⁰ Richard Apperly, Robert Irving and Peter Reynolds (1989). *Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*. Angus and Robertson. P.235