

# **Thematic Heritage Study of Modernist Houses in the ACT, 2024**

**The National Trust of Australia (ACT)**

**Funded by the ACT Government through  
the Heritage Grants Program**



# Project background

- Canberra's **modernist housing is unique** and once lost, irretrievable.
- There is increased **development pressure** in older suburbs, leading to loss or major alteration of modernist houses.
- There is a lack of **representation** of modernist houses in the ACT Heritage Register.



Image: Woden Special Housing, Kent Street, Hughes, 1963, by John Taylor of Leith Bartlett. Source: GML Heritage

# Key objectives

- Document **principles of modernism** that influenced architectural styles locally and nationally
- Identify **historical themes** that shaped the development of Canberra's housing
- Define **housing types, architectural styles** and **indicators** to be used in identification and assessment of modernist houses in Canberra
- Inform **future research and assessment**, e.g. inform future suburb-specific heritage studies, or nominations to the ACT Heritage Register

Townhouse at Cabarita Terrace, O'Malley, designed by Willemsen's development group.  
Source: GML Heritage





# The Study timeframe

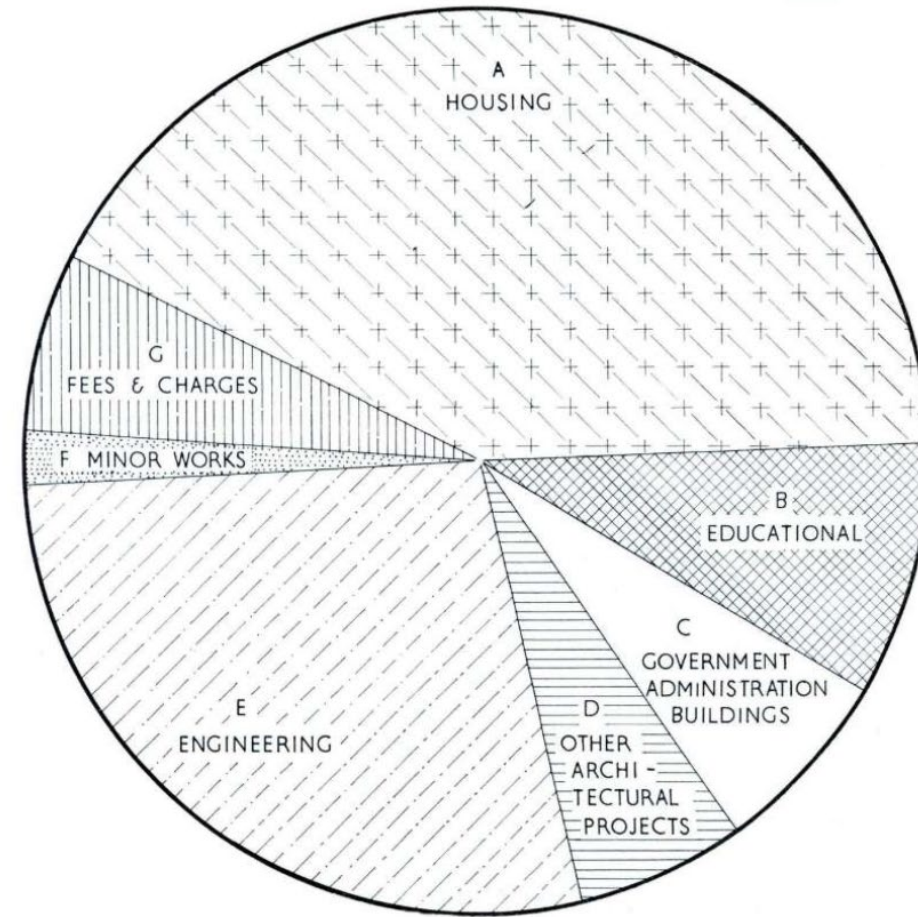
- Modernist movement in architecture in Australia in 1930s, a reaction to the Great Depression
- The term ‘mid-century modern’ implies a timeframe of **c1940-1960** (literature review)
- **1945-1988**: The study’s timeframe aligns with post-WII and NCDC’s role and development in Canberra
- To capture the broadest range of significant - architect designed houses in the ACT pre-self-government era.

Graphic showing NCDC expenditure on capital works in 1959/60.  
Source: Third Annual Report for the period 1st July 1959 to 30th June 1960

COMMISSION'S PROGRAMME OF CAPITAL WORKS

Particulars of expenditure by the Commission during the year 1959-60 are detailed in the annual accounts attached and were—

	£'000.
Housing and flats .. .. .	4,617
Education .. .. .	1,036
Commonwealth Administration .. .. .	738
Other architectural projects .. .. .	677
Engineering Services .. .. .	3,050
Minor works and furniture and fittings .. .. .	197
Fees and charges .. .. .	731
	<u>11,046</u>

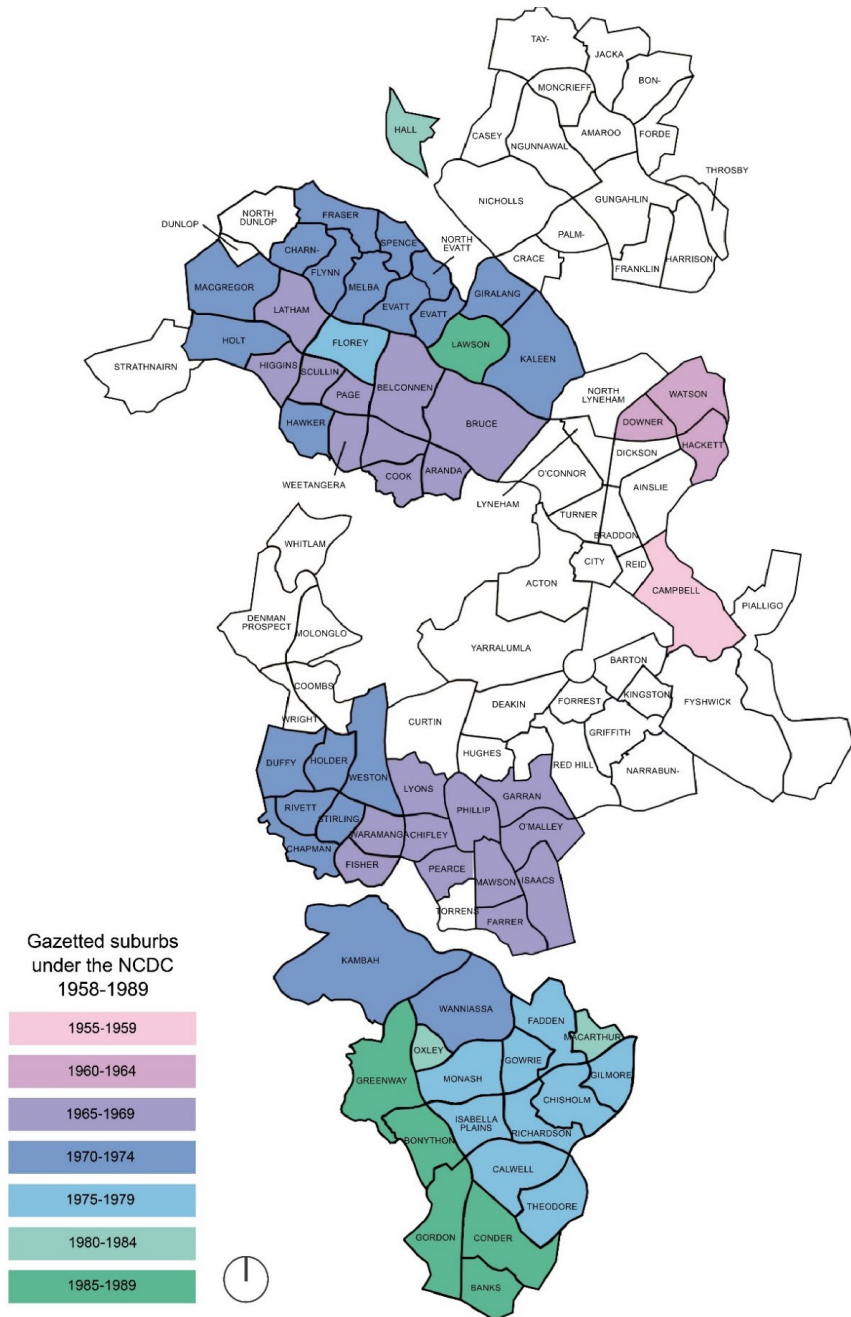


# Thematic history of modernism in Canberra

The study identifies 6 themes that reveal the story of modernism in Canberra

- Theme 1: The growth of global modernism
- Theme 2: A new government vision for Canberra - the NCDC
- Theme 3: Postwar residential growth in Canberra
- Theme 4: Architecture fit for a capital
- Theme 5: The bush capital – building for the environment
- Theme 6: Liveability and building community

# Suburbs gazetted + land sales

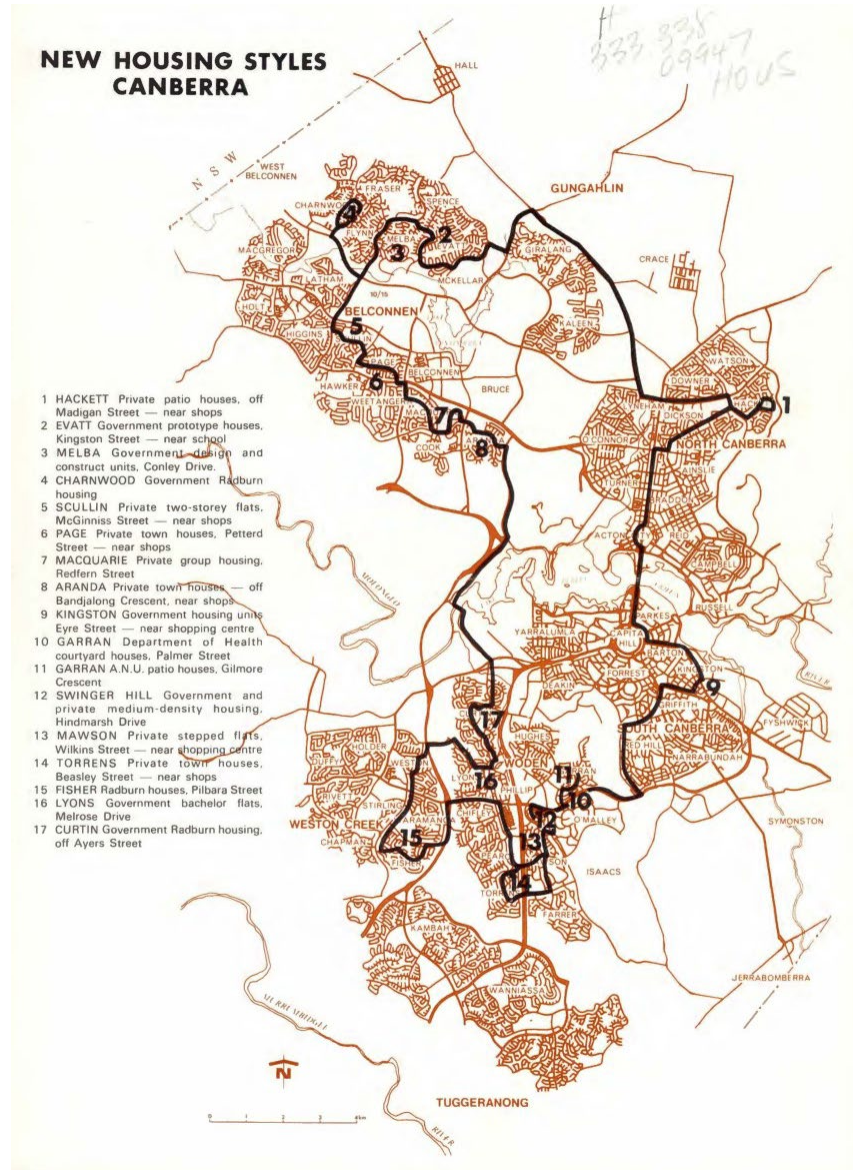


Land auction at Albert Hall, Canberra, 14 July 1970. (Source: NAA A7973, INT1142/2)

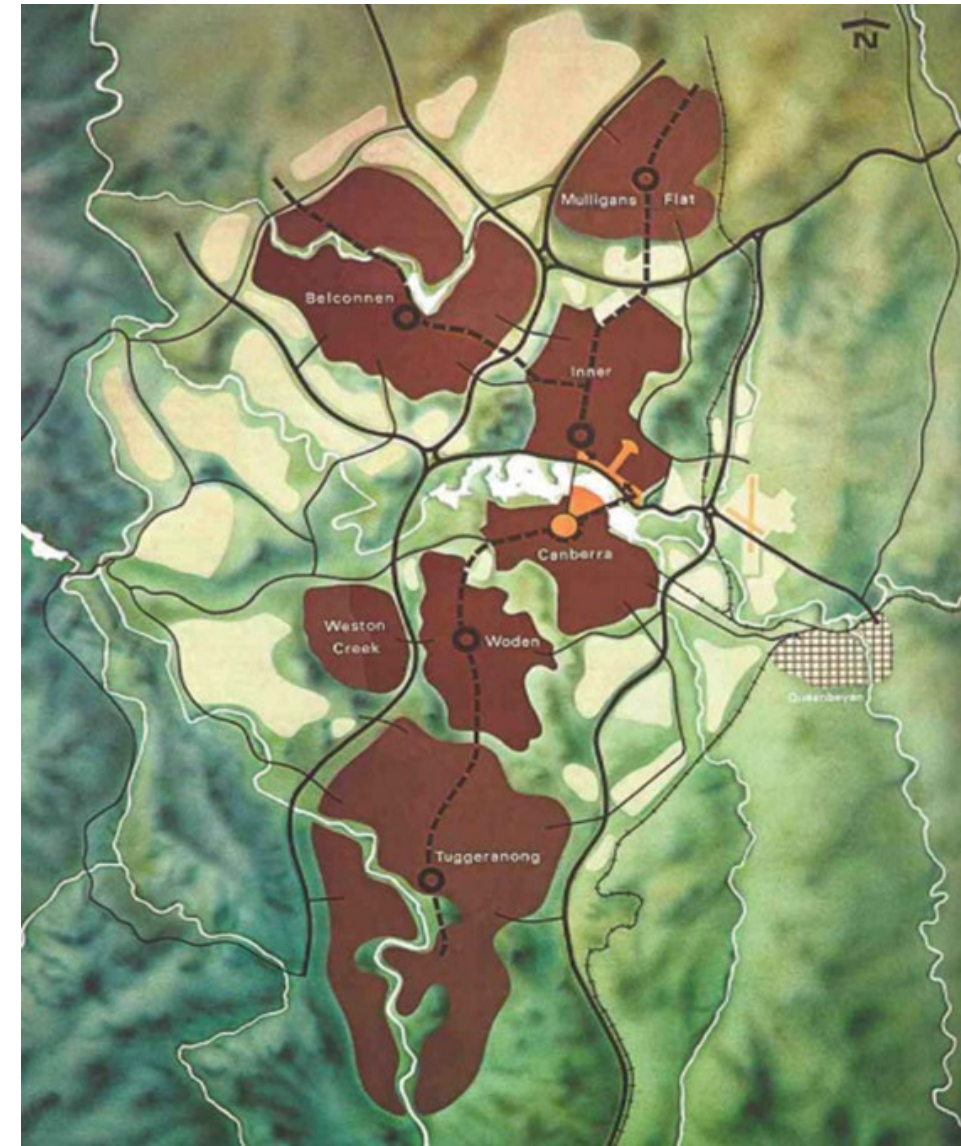


# NCDC role

- 1 HACKETT Private patio houses, off Madigan Street — near shops
- 2 EVATT Government prototype houses, Kingston Street — near school
- 3 MELBA Government design and construct units, Conley Drive.
- 4 CHARNWOOD Government Radburn housing
- 5 SCULLIN Private two-storey flats, McGinniss Street — near shops
- 6 PAGE Private town houses, Petterd Street — near shops
- 7 MACQUARIE Private group housing, Redfern Street
- 8 ARANDA Private town houses — off Bandjalong Crescent, near shops
- 9 KINGSTON Government housing units Eyre Street — near shopping centre
- 10 GARRAN Department of Health courtyard houses, Palmer Street
- 11 GARRAN A.N.U. patio houses, Gilmore Crescent
- 12 SWINGER HILL Government and private medium-density housing, Hindmarsh Drive
- 13 MAWSON Private stepped flats, Wilkins Street — near shopping centre
- 14 TORRENS Private town houses, Beasley Street — near shops
- 15 FISHER Radburn houses, Pilbara Street
- 16 LYONS Government bachelor flats, Melrose Drive
- 17 CURTIN Government Radburn housing, off Avers Street



Left: Map from 'Housing in Canberra' publication by NCDC, 1975. Source: ACT Heritage Library, BRN 237625

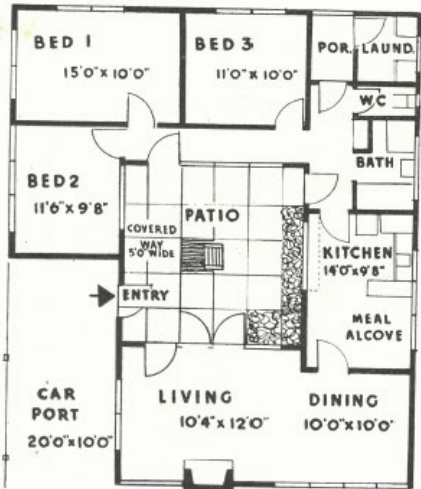
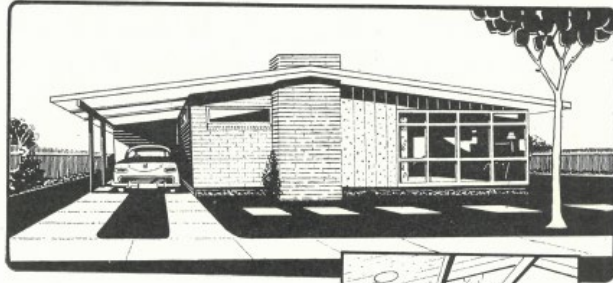


The Y-Plan as drawn in the NCDC's 1969 'Strategy for Metropolitan Growth'. Source: *Tomorrow's Canberra*, NCDC 1970, p 226



# NCDC influence on style through the Homes Advisory Service (HAS)

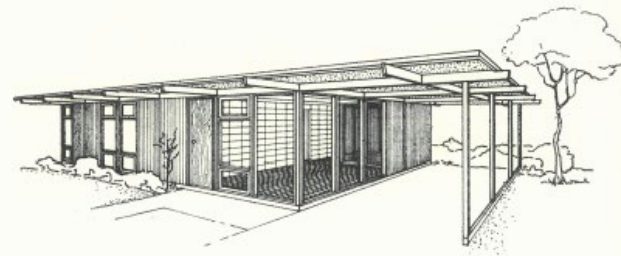
## Inspiration from the Romans



**Type: CV 17.** The 16 ft square central patio feature of this home owes a great deal to the Roman courtyard of old. It is open to the sky and provides gracious outdoors living and privacy at the same time.

About the patio are three spacious bedrooms, the master 15 ft. x 10 ft., large lounge 16 ft. x 10 ft. with additional dining space of 10 ft. x 10 ft. and a kitchen which incorporates work centre and breakfast nook neatly divided by a snack bar. Bathroom, laundry and toilet are situated to eliminate any cross traffic and are fully equipped.

## The Stramit House

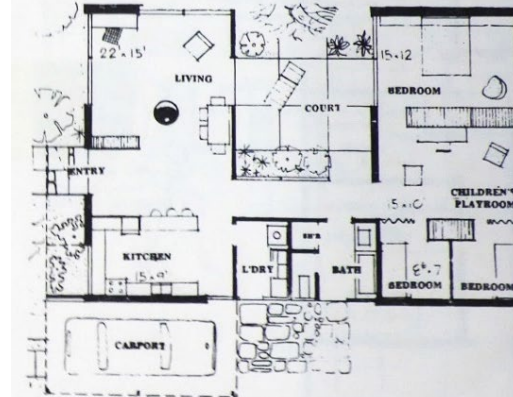
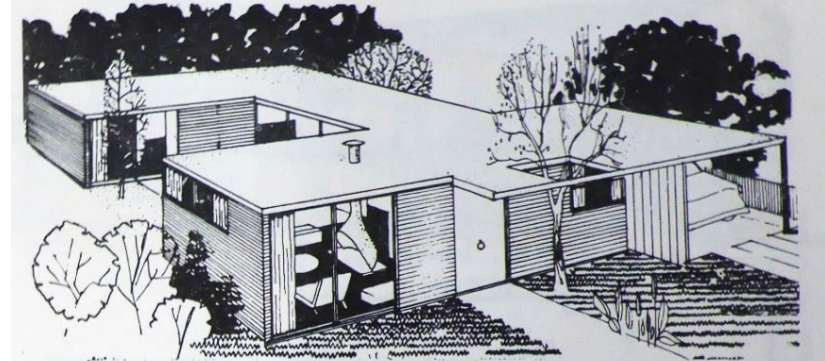


**Type: The Stramit House.** A forthright arrangement of rooms, planned within a rectangle. Three bedrooms in a line, service rooms grouped together, and a living-dining room which extends the full depth of the house.

Full functional and decorative use has been made of new materials. Stramit and concrete block walls and a Stramit roof.



V335



MONARO

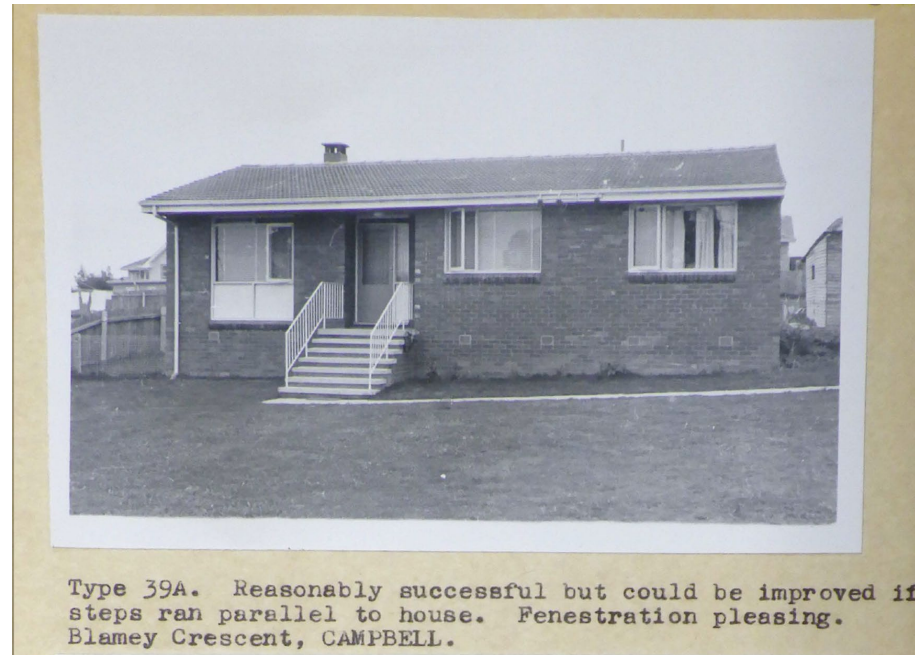
Left and Middle: Two examples from the NCDC Modern Homes Exhibition. (Source: Modern Homes Exhibition 1960).

Right: Plan of the Monaro house design, one of the Victorian designs used in Canberra. Source: 30 Home Plans for Canberra Conditions



# Housing types

1. Detached houses – single dwellings
2. Duplex houses – single- and double-storey
3. Townhouses
4. Flats and apartments
5. Courtyard and atrium housing



Department of Works analysis of a 400 series design government houses, 1961. Source: ACT Heritage Library



Architects from the Department of Works, 1966. (Source: NAA, Item ID 11765591)

# Modernism in architecture

Modernism in architecture stems from:

- **International style:** from the European tradition of the Bauhaus School and Le Corbusier's work
- **Organic style:** primarily influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright and other 'Prairie School' architects

House styles in Canberra:

1. **Post-war International**
2. **Organic**
3. **Regional – Melbourne and Sydney School styles**



Post-war  
International

Cater House,  
Red Hill,  
ArchitectureAU



Organic architecture

Rivendell, Kambah,  
Laurie Virr.  
GML Heritage



Regional Melbourne  
architecture

Townhouses, Forrester  
GML Heritage



# Post-war International style - characteristics



The Birch House, Yarralumla, by Noel Potter of Bunning and Madden - large expanses of glazing, overhang for shade cubiform overall shape. Source: Max Dupain and Associates Archives, all rights reserved.

Cubiform overall shape

Plain smooth walls with sections of contrasting textures

Areas of expansive glazing

Overhang for shade and external sun control devices

# Organic style – characteristics



Paterson House at 7 Juad Place, Aranda, 1970, designed by Enrico Taglietti. Source: GML Heritage

Horizontal emphasis in roof plane, timber boarded fascia

Asymmetrical massing of building form

Complex, angular geometry

Retention of the natural setting

Close relationship between indoors and outdoors



# Regional styles – characteristics



44 and 46 Vasey Crescent, Campbell, designed by Roy Grounds, 1960, in the Melbourne Regional style. Source: NAA, ID Number 11296144

## Melbourne Regional

Low-pitch gable roof

Long, unbroken roofline

Narrow edge to roof

Glass walls with regularly spaced  
timber mullions

Widely projecting eaves

# Regional styles – characteristics

## Sydney School

Asymmetrical massing.

Skillion roofs, tiled.

Little concern for the façade as a presentation front

Bagged/painted white masonry walls.



Torrens Townhouses Dirk Bolt for the NCDC, 1967. Source: GML Heritage



# Is there a Canberra style of modernist residential architecture?

In Canberra, exemplar modernist architecture is related to place.

The modernist ideals were applied to the Canberra conditions in innovative and exceptional ways by local and interstate practitioners.

Rivendell, 1975, Laurie Virr's Organic style shown through the use of complex, angular geometry, deep roof overhang and energy efficient design. Source: GML Heritage, 2016



# Study recommendations

Canberra is a city of modernist ideals, and this is well represented in its suburban planning, development and residential architecture.

1. An **audit** of modernist architectural residences
2. A **program** of significance assessment and nomination to ACT Heritage Register
3. A **review** current heritage and planning regulations to test suitability for protecting the ACT's modernist architecture (residential and commercial) and historic urban planning