

Prepared  
January  
1998

**INTERIM HERITAGE PLACES REGISTER**

**CITATION**

**Hotel Kurrajong**

---

**NOMINATED BY:**

National Trust of Australia (ACT)

---

**LOCATION OF PLACE:**

Blocks 2, 3, 4 & 5 Section 10, Barton, bounded by National Circuit, Bligh St., Macquarie St. and Blackall St.

---

**FEATURES INTRINSIC TO THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PLACE:**

The features intrinsic to the heritage significance of the place are:

- The building and its interior
  - The associated courtyards
  - Room 214
  - The landscaped setting
- 

**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:**

The Hotel Kurrajong has historical, social, and architectural significance relating to the early years of Canberra's development.

The Hotel, built as the second hostel (next after the Hotel Canberra), formed part of the early fabric of the developing Canberra. It played a significant role in the Federal Capital Commission's building programme in providing hostel accommodation for administrative staff and officials and their families who were transferred to Canberra for the opening of Parliament.

The Hotel is important for its role in providing residential accommodation for Members of Parliament, particularly those in the Labor Party, for almost half a century.

It has a special association with the life of Ben Chifley who was a resident at the Hotel for eleven years including his term as Prime Minister of Australia. Room 205 (now room 214) is remembered as the room in which he lived and where he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1951.

The Hotel Kurrajong is one of a number of buildings designed particularly for Canberra by the Commonwealth Architect John Smith Murdoch in the Garden-Pavilion style. It exemplifies the design attributes of the Federal Capital and is

- 1• The Hotel be conserved in accordance with the recommendations of the Conservation Plan.
- 2• The Hotel Kurrajong continues to operate as a hotel.
- 3• Room 214 (previously 205) be conserved *in situ*, restoring it to the period of Chifley's occupation. Continued use is considered suitable.
- 4• No trees greater in height than 5 metres be removed without reference to the ACT Heritage Council.

---

#### DOCUMENT HISTORY:

1. (date) Draft citation considered by ACT Heritage Council Meeting (number)
2. (date) Draft citation released for public comment.
3. (date) Revised citation for ACT Heritage Council Meeting (number)
4. (date) Gazetted in an interim Heritage Places Register

---

Attachment A

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

##### 1. DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:

The Hotel Kurrajong is located in the Canberra suburb of Barton. It consists of a symmetrical group of linked two storey pavilions separated by courts. It is a compact example of the garden pavilion style conceived by John Smith Murdoch for Canberra's public buildings. The design was selected to blend in with Walter Burley Griffin's landscape concept of Canberra as a Garden City. Griffin's intention was to shun high multi-storied buildings for more open, horizontal structures giving 'more and better sunlight, verdure and beauty' (Harrison 1995,30).

There is a central communal block which is the focus of the massing. This central wing is used for dining and other public rooms. The sleeping accommodation for staff was on the floor above this wing while the sleeping accommodation for guests was located in detached symmetrically grouped pavilions connected by covered walkways with surrounding courtyards. The upper floor in the central wing now accommodates a library, classrooms, conference rooms for the Hotel Management School.

The front pavilions (Banksia Pavilion and Wattle Pavilion) have been refurbished for use as general guest accommodation and the remaining pavilions are now used as student residential accommodation and teaching and office space.

The Hotel Kurrajong is constructed of rendered brick above a red brick base. It has hipped roofs of terracotta tiles. It has sash windows with single panes at the bottom and four panes at the top. The use of roughcast stucco finished walls above red brick base and with terracotta tile roofs was typical of the visual effect adopted in Canberra's domestic architecture of the time, eg houses in Reid.

impaired the visual aspect of the complex from the northern and southern sides.

The Hotel reopened in 1995 as a licensed hotel and the Australian International Hotel School.

---

## **2. STATUS OF PLACE AT NOMINATION DATE:**

- Classified by National Trust of Australia (ACT) as an element of the Parliamentary Triangle.
  - Entered on the Register of the National Estate (Database No. 018152, File No. 8/01/000/0074).
  - Listed as a significant building, Royal Australian Institute of Architects.
- 

## **3. BACKGROUND:**

The Hotel Kurrajong was designed by the Commonwealth's Chief Architect, John Smith Murdoch in 1924. It was one of the hostels built under the Federal Capital Commission's program to provide hostel accommodation for the administrative staff and officials who were transferred to Canberra for the 1927 opening of Parliament in the newly completed provisional Parliament House. The hostels were also built to accommodate parliamentarians and other shorter term visitors to Canberra who required temporary accommodation.

Murdoch adopted a garden pavilion style for the design of the hostel buildings, which was influenced by the Prairie style of Frank Lloyd Wright, a style continued by Walter Burley Griffin. The Hotel Canberra exemplified this style, while the later hostels were less pretentious. The Hotel Kurrajong and also the Hotel Acton had little decorative treatment and less of the Prairie styling, careful massing or domestic character of the earlier hostels (Charlton, 1884, 37). The garden pavilion style was conceived by Murdoch as being appropriate to the hostel function as it was home-like in scale with the benefit of providing residents with relative seclusion in a number of separate pavilion wings.

The specific reason for the naming of the Hotel Kurrajong, other than its being named after an Australian native tree is uncertain. It seems likely that it was named after Kurrajong hill which Walter Burley Griffin had selected as the site for the Capital (Watson 1927, 204), and which became known as Capital Hill (Daley, 1994, 82).

The Hotel Kurrajong, known as Hostel No. 2, was one of three main hostels built in the early 1920s, all designed by John Smith Murdoch. The Hotel Canberra was Hostel No. 1 and was the first hostel to be built in Canberra, the initial stages of the building opening in 1924. Gorman House, originally known as the Hotel Ainslie, was Hostel No. 3 and was opened in 1924. The Hotel Kurrajong was the next hostel to be opened, on 23 December 1926.

Other hostels to be opened as part of the acceleration of the FCC's building program in 1926/27 were the Hotel Acton, which was Hostel No. 4 and also designed by John Smith Murdoch, the Hotel Wellington in Barton, Brassey House, near the Hotel Wellington, another building named the Hotel Ainslie but located on Limestone

In 1931 the Department of Home Affairs conducted an investigation following continuing criticism over the cost of running hotels in Canberra and the rates charged. In April 1933, the Minister for the Interior announced that the Hotel Kurrajong would be closed from 24 April. There were several bids to lease the Hotel, presumably on the assumption that it would be transferred to the private sector as other hostels had been. Although it lost its liquor license, the Hotel was converted to hostel status rather than closed. Residents of the Bachelor Quarters were transferred to the hostel and were soon joined by ninety temporary Census workers.

In 1936 additional pavilions G and H were constructed, probably due to the demand for short-term accommodation as the Great Depression lifted. Tariffs were increased significantly.

The 'housekeeper-in-charge' was Isabella ('Bella') Southwell, who became manageress in early 1931. At that time she had had six year's experience working at other hostels in Canberra, having been involved for short periods in establishing the Hotel Canberra as well as the Hotels Acton and Ainslie. She remained as manager at the Kurrajong until her death in 1946.

Members of Parliament, mainly from the Labor party, stayed at the Hotel Kurrajong throughout the 1930s. During the World war II period they were forced to share the Hotel with junior grade public servants due to the demands on residential accommodation in Canberra. The Hotel's most famous resident during this period was John Curtin, Labor MP, who moved to the Lodge when he became Prime Minister.

While some Country Party politicians such as John McEwen and Larry Anthony stayed there after the War, Labor politicians predominated. Ben Chifley did not occupy the Lodge during his term as Prime Minister from 1945-49, preferring to reside at the Kurrajong. In June 1951, he suffered a fatal heart attack in his room, number 205 (now 214) at the Hotel. The room has been accorded special status since the 1994 refurbishment and the dining room is now called the Chifley Restaurant. There were also many other well-known politicians and senior bureaucrats who stayed at the Hotel Kurrajong during the 1940s and early 1950s, including Arthur Calwell, John Dedman and Arthur Drakeford.

In 1975, the Hotel Kurrajong was closed as a hostel. It was used for government offices, including for staff from Parliament House from 1978 until its refurbishment as an International Hotel and Management School in 1994.

---

of Canberra grew by 8,000 to 24,000 of whom just over 5,000 (21%) lived in hostels. The 1950s in Canberra were again plagued by shortages of private housing, both newly built and available for rent or purchase while potential tenants always exceeded vacancies for government houses.

## **5. Working**

### **5.2 Organising workers and workplaces**

## **8. Developing cultural institutions and ways of life**

### **8.1 Organising recreation**

#### **8.12 Living in and around Australian homes**

## **9. Marking the phases of life**

### **9.4 Forming families and partnerships**

Many people lived in Canberra's hostels during the early years of the Capital's development. This period was often known as 'the hostel era' of the new capital. Few public servants who moved to jobs in Canberra escaped some period of internship in one of the hostels. Some found the life trying, especially young single men who were often driven to drink by the weather and boredom. Single women often wondered if they would ever leave the hostels since flats seemed to go only to married couples. 'Why cannot I', mourned one of them, 'have the freedom of choosing my own colour schemes and furniture, food and meal hours, and friends and extra-mural associates?' Sometimes the shortage of hostel accommodation for married couples forced their segregation into one-sex establishments. A former hostel resident recalled a young couple in this plight who used to sleep together in the husband's hostel bedroom until ordered not to do so by the hostel manager (Sparke 1988,25)!

Living in a hostel environment could extend over several years. People built personal sanctuaries in their rooms and developed routines which became hallowed by usage. Management changes to the house rules (sometimes petty and insensitive) could meet with fierce resistance. Petitions were signed against such regulations as insisting men wear ties to meals, banning women from wearing strapless gowns, sunfrocks and jeans to the dining room, and insisting that furniture in guests' rooms had to conform to a regulation pattern. At one Hostel guests became hostile when the Department of Interior proposed to omit fruit juices from evening meals at a time when expectant mothers and young children were staying there (Sparke 1988,26). It is, however, doubtful whether any such personal restrictions were enforced among the residents of the Hotel Kurrajong to such an extent.

But on the whole, the hostel system functioned relatively well and most people were able to adapt to it, pending an offer of a government home in the near future, and to find ways of alleviating the monotony. Most hostels had social clubs which organised outings as well as table tennis, carpet bowls and chess. Films were shown in some hostels on Sunday evenings. Despite the personal restrictions, Canberra's hostel life had much to recommend it. Guests had good accommodation and prepared meals (although not always appreciated). They were served at table, even given sandwiches to take to work. And the cost of their stay was generally reasonable and substantially subsidised by the government.

## **5. ANALYSIS AGAINST THE CRITERIA SPECIFIED IN SCHEDULE 2 OF THE LAND (PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT) ACT 1991**

**Criterion (i):**            **A place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time.**

The Kurrajong Hotel is a good example of the few former Government Hostels in Canberra in the Garden-Pavilion style by the Commonwealth Architect J.S. Murdoch. The design is consistent with the other early hostels (the Hotel Canberra, Hotel Acton, and Gorman House). The Garden-Pavilion style was developed for Canberra to comply with Walter Burley Griffin's intention of low horizontally distributed buildings forming a feature of a 'Garden City' concept for the new capital. Griffin's intention was to shun high multi-storied buildings for more open horizontal structures giving better light and beauty. Although the building has gone through several phases of use and a major renovation, its integrity is quite high with much of the original style characteristics remaining.

**Criterion (iii):**            **A place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost, or is of exceptional interest.**

The Hotel Kurrajong represents an early phase in Canberra's developing social and cultural history. This phase has come to be known locally as the "Hostel Era". Originally named Hostel No. 2, it was the first of several hostels built during the early years of Canberra. It was designed to provide superior accommodation for Members of Parliament, senior government officers and visiting dignitaries. Together with Hotel Canberra (Hostel No.1) it therefore reflects the highest of the various levels of the socio-economic system that developed in Canberra during its early years of construction. Other lower levels in the socio-economic scale are reflected by Gorman House, Hotel Acton and Beauchamp House.

**Criterion (iv):**            **A place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations.**

The Hotel Kurrajong was one of four hostels built during the early years of Canberra to accommodate Members of Parliament and government officers. It became particularly associated with the members and staff of the Labor Party, many of whom used it as their Canberra home while Parliament was in session.

The Hotel Kurrajong has a strong association with the Canberra community and is a significant focal point in the establishment and development of social life in Canberra. It is regularly used by groups, families, and individuals as a meeting place or a place to celebrate special and personal events. External and internal visual aspects of the

8. Watson, F., *A Brief History of Canberra*, Canberra, ACT, 1927
9. Harrison, P. *Walter Burley Griffin Landscape Architect*, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
10. Federal Capital Commission      Memorandum 9-12-29 'Hotels and Boarding Houses' G/29/3215, Australian Archives A430/1/9/212.
11. Federal Capital Commission      *Hotels and Boarding Establishments, 1930-31*, Australian Archives, A1/1 34/9419

### **Oral sources**

Interview with Dr Barry Price, Canberra and District Historical Society, 17 November 1997. Copy of draft chapter for publication prepared by Dr Price held in National Trust files.

Interview with Ms Judy Lundy, manager of the Hotel Kurrajong, 20 November 1997. Information provided held in National Trust files.

---

**Prepared by  
Ms Carol Cosgrove &  
Dr Peter Dowling  
for National Trust of Australia (ACT)  
10/1/98**

**Appendix B**

*Extract from Federal Capital Commission Statement, Hotels and Boarding Establishments, 1930-31, Australian Archives, A1/1 34/9419*

**Canberra Hostels  
Financial Results for 1930-31**

| Hostel          | Average No. of staff per day | Wages Cost for year | Average No. of guests per day | Cost of staff per guest per week |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Hotel Canberra  | 42                           | £7,666              | 38                            | £3.19.1                          |
| Hotel Kurrajong | 34                           | £5,607              | 47                            | £2.6.10                          |
| Gorman House    | 20                           | £2,821              | 90                            | £0.12.3                          |

| Item                             | Hotel Canberra | Hotel Kurrajong | Gorman House |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Salaries & wages                 | £7,666         | £5,607          | £2,821       |
| Provisions                       | £6,000         | £4,057          | £2884        |
| Freight, Transport & Incidentals | £299           | £215            | £131         |
| Laundry                          | £1,197         | £620            | £377         |
| Fuel                             | £673           | £589            | £380         |
| Light & Power                    | £1,465         | £826            | £394         |
| Telephone                        | £223           | £4              | £35          |
| Household Expenses               | £174           | £155            | £132         |
| Sundries                         | £259           | £178            | £221         |
| Overhead                         | £594           | £428            | £252         |
| Total                            | £18,550        | £12,679         | £7,627       |

| Item                         | Hotel Canberra | Hotel Kurrajong | Gorman House |
|------------------------------|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Working Expenses             | £18,550        | £12,679         | £7,627       |
| Cash Maintenance             | £1,617         | £528            | £433         |
| Total                        | £20,167        | £13,207         | £8,060       |
| Revenue                      | £15,485        | £11,398         | £7,172       |
| Cash Loss                    | £4,682         | £1,809          | £888         |
| Cash Loss per guest per week | £2. 7. 11      | £0. 15. 1       | £0. 3. 10    |