



ACT Heritage Council

**AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY
HERITAGE REGISTER
Background Information**

Barton Conference Centre

BLOCK 1 SECTION 13, BARTON

At its meeting of 1 April 2026 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Barton Conference Centre was not eligible for provisional registration.

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

Description

The Barton Conference Centre is a low-scale, modernist building set into its site between two taller buildings along Brisbane Avenue. Designed by Enrico Taglietti and completed in 1967, the place is characterised by a single-storey above-ground lobby and catering area, now a café, with the original conference chamber constructed below ground level, which has since been gutted and is now a gym. The building was sunken to reduce its visual impact and to integrate it with the surrounding landscaped setting.

In its original form, the roof of the underground chamber supported a shallow reflecting pond and fountain that formed part of an integrated climatic control system, while strong horizontal roof lines and sculptural curved walls expressed the building's organic architectural intent. Externally, the building originally featured raw off-form concrete surfaces, white Tyrolean render to brickwork, and prominent splayed timber fascias.

Many of these elements have since been removed, replaced or altered. The pond and fountain have been removed and replaced with paving, original finishes have been rendered over, and additional structures, stairs, services and drainage elements have been added in a manner that interrupts the clarity of the original form. Internally, the conference chamber and associated spaces have been gutted, with the removal of architect-designed interiors, fittings and furniture.

As a result, while the basic massing and partially underground configuration remain legible, much of the material expression and spatial character that once defined the place has been lost.

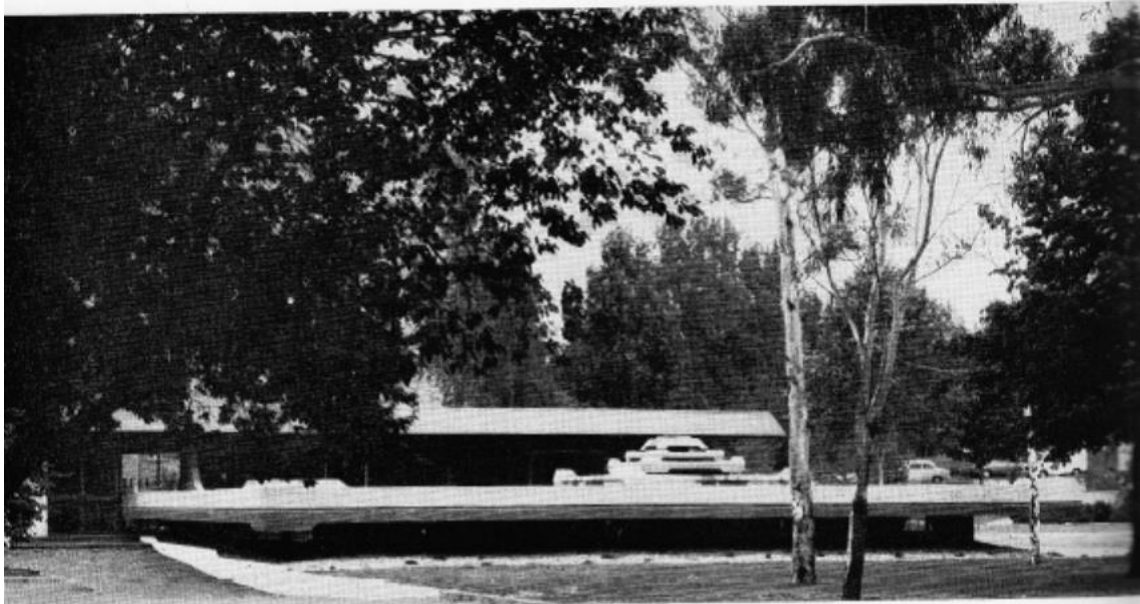


Figure 1 The original built form and setting for the Barton Conference Centre (from Architecture in Australia, 1968:1108)



Figure 2 The 2026 form and setting, showing the mature park and later steps to the courtyard/filled-in pond

History

The Barton Conference Centre was completed in 1967 as a purpose-built conference facility for the Associated Chamber of Manufacturers Australia (ACMA), located at the corner of Brisbane Avenue and National Circuit, Barton. The building was designed by Enrico Taglietti, with engineering by K. Sellick & Associates, during a period of significant institutional development in Canberra under the National Capital Development Commission. The building is an unusual example of the architect's work in Canberra, although many of his designs have incorporated underground or sunken elements.

In addition to the Barton Conference Centre, Taglietti's approach to underground or sunken designs can be seen in the Dickson Library (Canberra, 1968), which features partially recessed areas, and the Giralang Primary School (Canberra, 1976), where the library and classrooms are set below ground level to enhance environmental control and visual integration.

Beyond Canberra, Taglietti applied similar principles at the Saint Anthony Church (Sydney, 1968), and the St Kilda Library (Melbourne, 1973), both of which exemplify his use of sunken spaces and sculptural forms to respond to site constraints and climatic conditions.

Building design and evolution

The Barton Conference Centre was originally designed by Taglietti to address the challenges of a constrained, leftover site at the corner of Brisbane Avenue and National Circuit. The design used a sunken configuration: the principal conference chamber was constructed below ground level, with a low-scale foyer and catering area expressed above ground. This approach minimised the building's visual impact, harmonised it with the landscaped surrounds, and provided controlled internal conditions suitable for conference activities.

Dr Taglietti noted that the site was too small to have an effective building above ground as it would have been too intrusive and there were other benefits such as the underground siting and pond above providing insulative properties. (personal communication, 2013 ACT Heritage)

Architecturally, the Centre's original design was marked by strong horizontal roof lines, sculptural curved walls, and an emphasis on spatial sequence and internal volume. The above-ground portion was articulated with large, chamfered edges and curving slopes, presenting as a sculptural form against the backdrop of more conventional surrounding buildings.

The roof of the underground chamber supported a shallow reflecting pond and fountain, which not only reflected the surrounding landscape but also formed part of an integrated environmental control system. This system, provided insulation and cooling water for the air conditioning plant, reflecting broader mid-twentieth-century experimentation with water-based cooling and climatic responsiveness in institutional architecture in Canberra.

Enrico Taglietti and his contribution to Canberra

Enrico Taglietti (1926–2019) was an Italian-born architect whose prolific career in Australia, particularly in Canberra, left a lasting mark on the city's built environment. Taglietti's design philosophy was rooted in organic and expressive modernism, prioritising the integration of buildings with their sites, a sensitivity to climate, and the creation of sculptural forms. His work is characterised by bold horizontal rooflines, dramatic cantilevers, and the interplay of light and shadow, with interiors designed as cohesive extensions of the architectural intent.

In Canberra, Taglietti's portfolio includes several renowned public and private buildings, such as the Dickson Library (1968), the Australian War Memorial Annex (1977), St Kilda

Library (1973, in Melbourne but influential in the ACT), and numerous schools and churches. His commitment to total design extended to furniture, fittings, and landscaping, ensuring a holistic architectural experience. Taglietti's contribution has been recognised through numerous awards and the listing of several of his designs on heritage registers.

The Barton Conference Centre, though significantly altered, retains many of the design elements of Taglietti's innovative approach that has led to his enduring influence on Canberra's architectural heritage.

His legacy is celebrated for its unique blend of technical experimentation, sculptural expression, and contextual sensitivity. As noted in Council decisions regarding other Taglietti works, his buildings are highly valued for their originality, craftsmanship, and the way they respond to both site and climate.

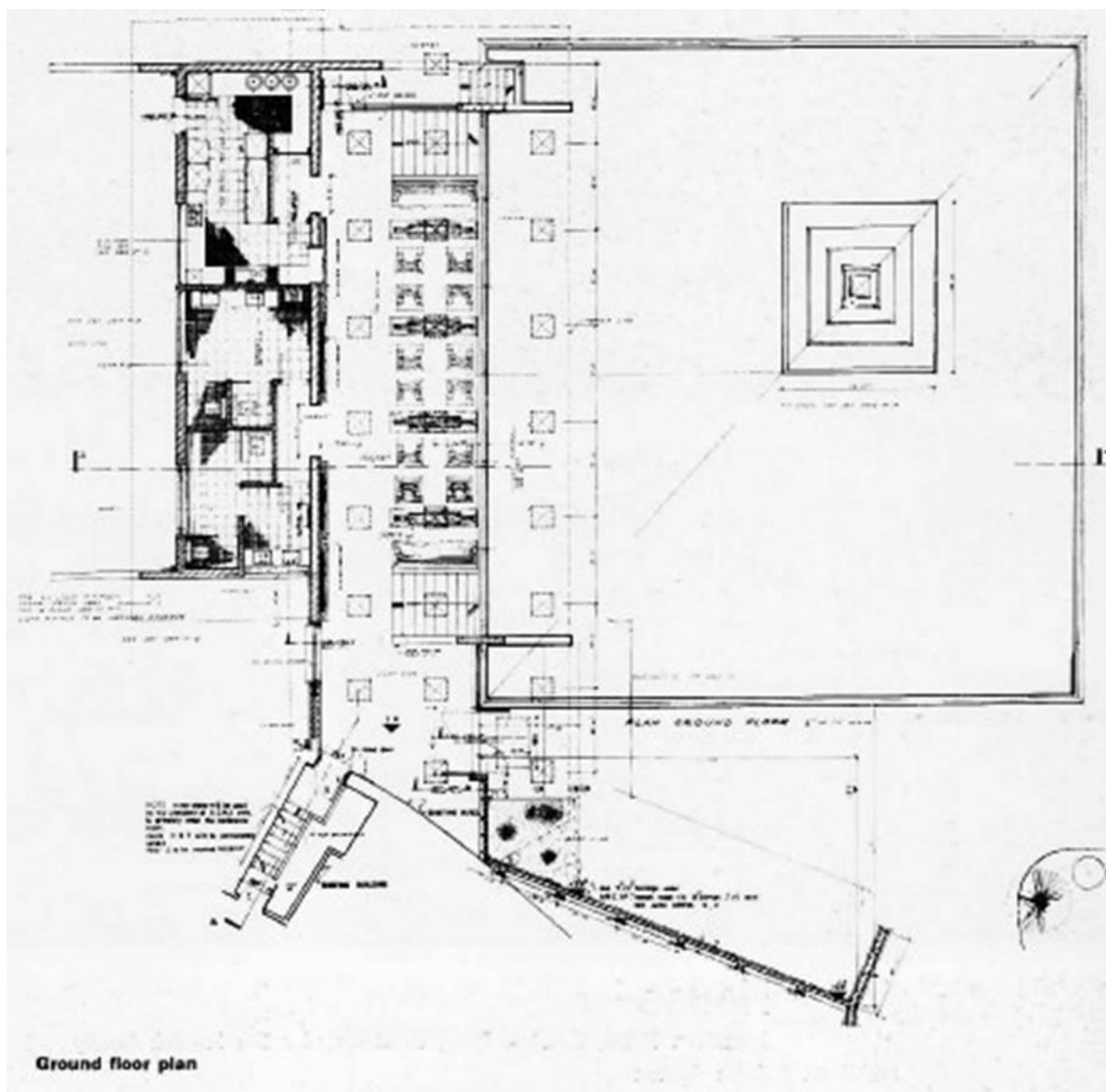


Figure 3 Original ground floor plans (from *Architecture in Australia*, 1968:1109)

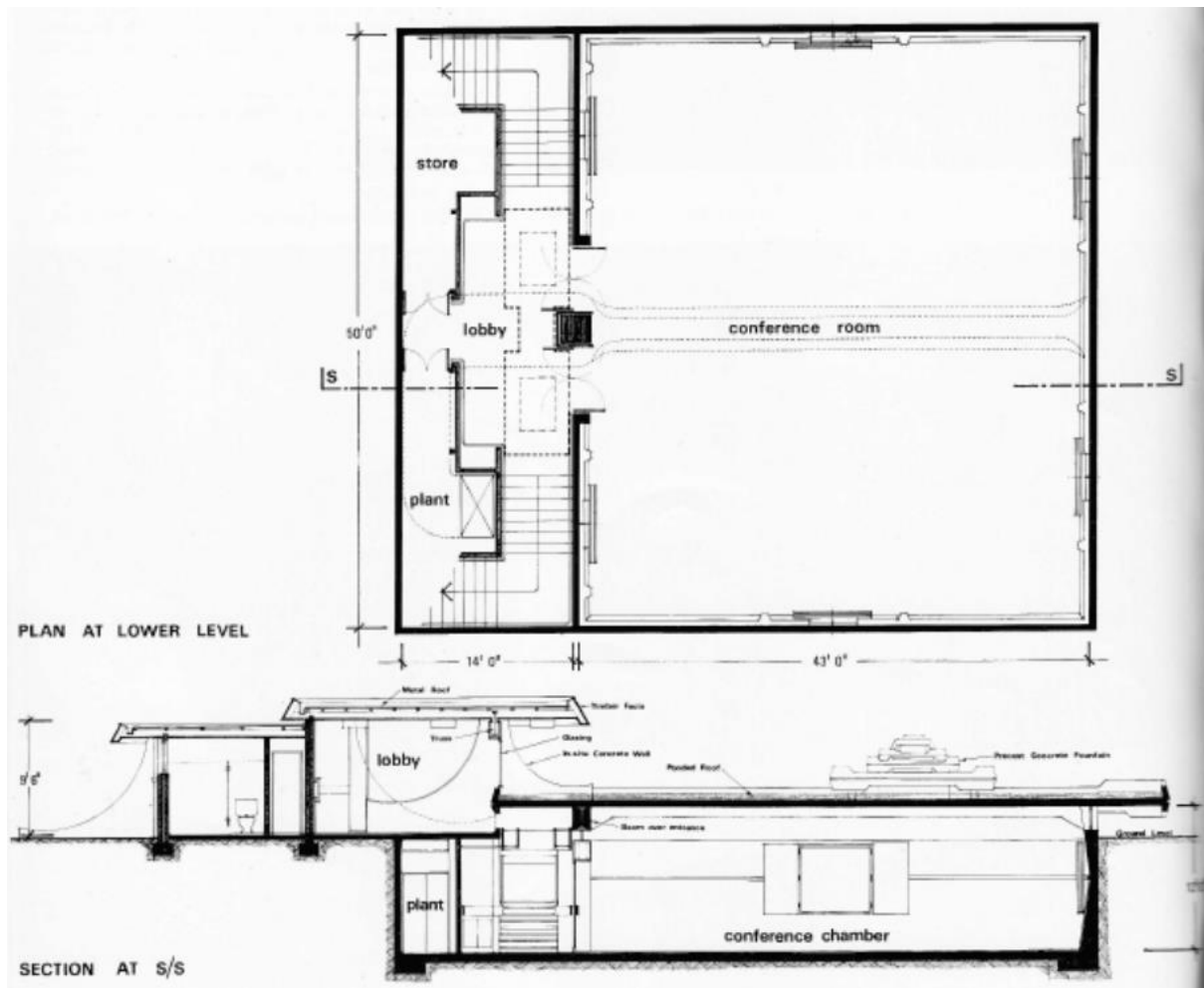


Figure 4 Original lower level and section plans (from *Architecture in Australia*, 1968:1109)

Integrity

The original material palette included off-form concrete, white Tyrolean render to brickwork, and played timber fascias. Taglietti's involvement extended to the design of the interior fittings and furniture, ensuring the building represented a complete manifestation of his architectural philosophy, from entrance to movement through the building spaces, how different elements interacted with each other, the lighting, textures and colours.

Over subsequent decades, the Barton Conference Centre underwent a series of substantial alterations. The pond and fountain were removed, replaced with paving; original finishes were rendered over or replaced; additional structures, stairs, and services were added, interrupting the clarity of the original form. Internally, the conference chamber and associated spaces were gutted, with the removal of architect-designed interiors, fittings, and furniture. The underground chamber was adapted for different uses, further diminishing the integrity of Taglietti's vision.

As a result, while the basic massing and partially underground configuration remain legible, much of the material expression, spatial character, and technical systems that once defined the place have been lost. The cumulative impact of these changes has significantly reduced

the building's ability to demonstrate its original design intent or to clearly express the historical, technical, or architectural attributes noted at the time of its construction.

While Dr Taglietti was of the opinion that the basic building is recoverable and that the changes are largely cosmetic and reversible, the Council notes that any assessment of the place must be based on its current state, as an ideal future state representing the original design cannot be enforced or authentically recreated.



Figure 5 Original east end concrete features and wood fascias (Wille, P., & Taglietti, E. (1966). Associated Chamber of Manufacturers Conference Centre. Brisbane Avenue. Barton. Canberra. A.C.T. Dr. Enrico Taglietti. 1966.)



Figure 6 East end concrete features painted of rendered, PVC drainage and fibrous cement sheeting fascias (2026)



Figure 7 The northern end of the original pond under the eaves of the lobby (Wille, P., & Taglietti, E. (1966). Associated Chamber of Manufacturers Conference Centre. Brisbane Avenue. Barton. Canberra. A.C.T. Dr. Enrico Taglietti. 1966.)



Figure 8 The only remaining original Taglietti designed light fixtures in 2026 are located under the eaves between the café and courtyard, facing west.



Figure 9 The original lobby (Wille, P., & Taglietti, E. (1966). Associated Chamber of Manufacturers Conference Centre. Brisbane Avenue. Barton. Canberra. A.C.T. Dr. Enrico Taglietti. 1966.)



Figure 10 The lobby has been converted into a cafe and the vestibule area redesigned. The curved wall section has been painted with the lower section raised and flattened. (2026)

Design features

Intact:

- Sunken into the ground added noise as well as temperature and visual insulation
- Sculptural, terraced form with single above-ground storey and sunken meeting room beneath
- Sweeping/scalloped off-form concrete motifs juxtaposed with long horizontal, angled forms
- Underground conference chamber with natural light through high strip windows
- Cantilevered concrete steps at the eastern side leading up to the pool area

Modified:

- Board-marked raw concrete finishes, including to roof/pond edges and lobby end walls
 - Now painted or rendered
- White Tyrolean render to external brickwork above ground level
 - Now painted over
- Integral relationship with the surrounding pocket park and buildings, forming part of the original design intent
 - Surrounding buildings replaced, now taller and closer
- Splayed western red cedar fascias emphasising the flat horizontal roofs
 - Replaced with fibrous cement sheeting
- Northeast corner of the original pool wall cut to install small pedestrian walkway
- Profiled terrazzo internal stair treads
- Internal stairs to underground section narrowed to half original width on western end, , original handrails partially removed with the remainder painted, curved wall section at top painted and lower end boxed in and raised
- Eastern internal stairs built over
- Internal wall finishes painted

Non-extant:

- Rooftop pool and fountain integrated into the air-conditioning cooling system
- Carpeted lower wall lining in the conference chamber (also part of acoustic design)
- Original carpet replaced with floating wood floorboards
- Original Japanese-style landscaped courtyard between the conference centre and the main building replaced with corridor/vestibule
- Taglietti-designed interiors, including lighting, fittings, furniture (except chairs)
- Six large timber panels displaying the state and territory coats of arms made from timbers native to each, two of which opened to reveal projection screens
- Deep blue vermiculite sprayed on upper internal walls and ceiling of the chamber for acoustic and thermal performance

Intrusive:

- Courtyard paving, perimeter planting to filled in pool
- New stairs at southern end leading up to courtyard (Taglietti was consulted and insisted that they make a structure that didn't affect the original material)
- PVC drainage under cantilevered courtyard
- new services building added to the northern end removing one of the curved wall/butresses



Figure 11 Setting of the place in a pocket park along Brisbane Avenue (2026)



Figure 12 Later stairs, rendered finish and PVC pipe drainage (2026)



Figure 13 The northern extension has removed the curved wall on the west side of the original building (2026)

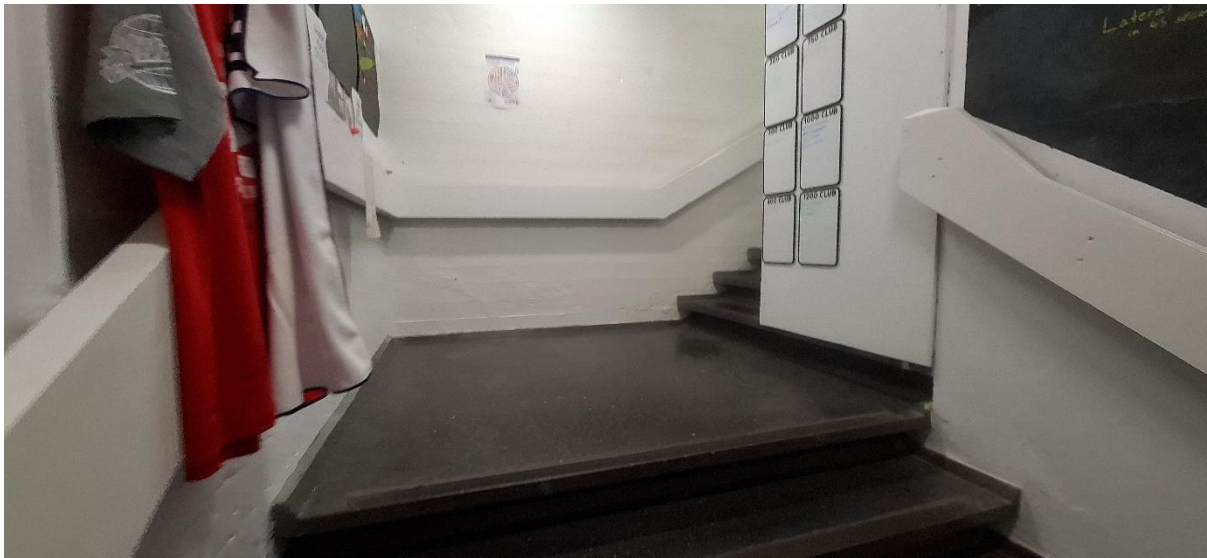


Figure 14 Internal west stairs showing reduction in width at the landing. Profiled with flared edge geometry terrazzo internal stair treads remain, but the original wall and handrails have been painted (2026)

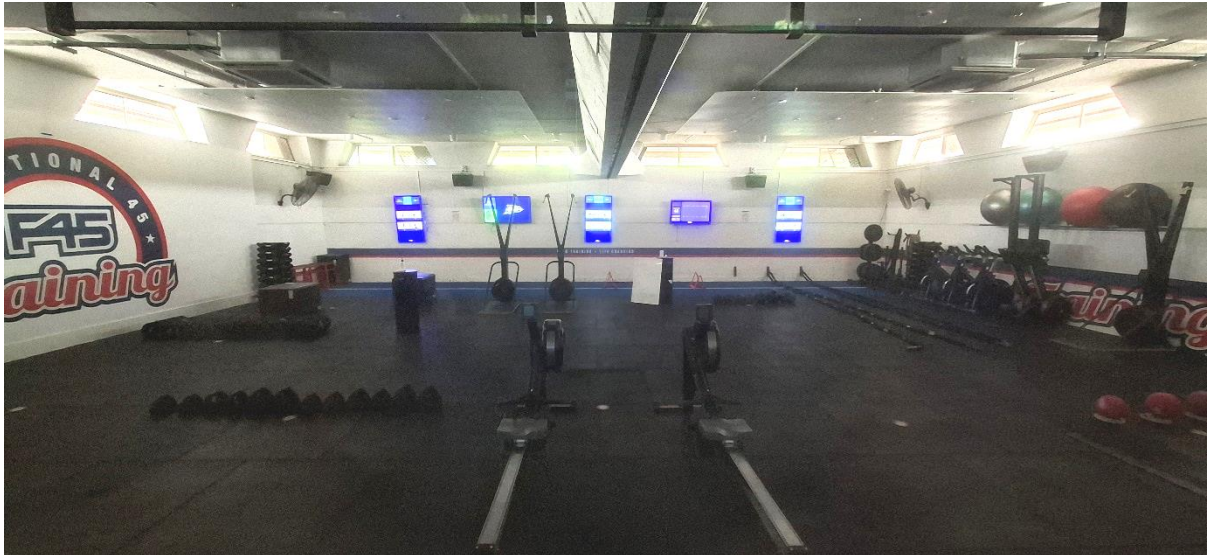


Figure 15 Internal conference space, now gutted and used as a gym. The underlying geometrical features of the Taglietti design can be seen in the windows and the central support beam (2026)

Physical condition

An examination of the external presentation of the building shows that the basic structure and remaining features are generally good, with the exception of the fascias and soffits that show signs of weathering.



Figure 16 Some original material from the fascias may remain under the later cladding, but appears to be in poor condition (2026)

Place boundary

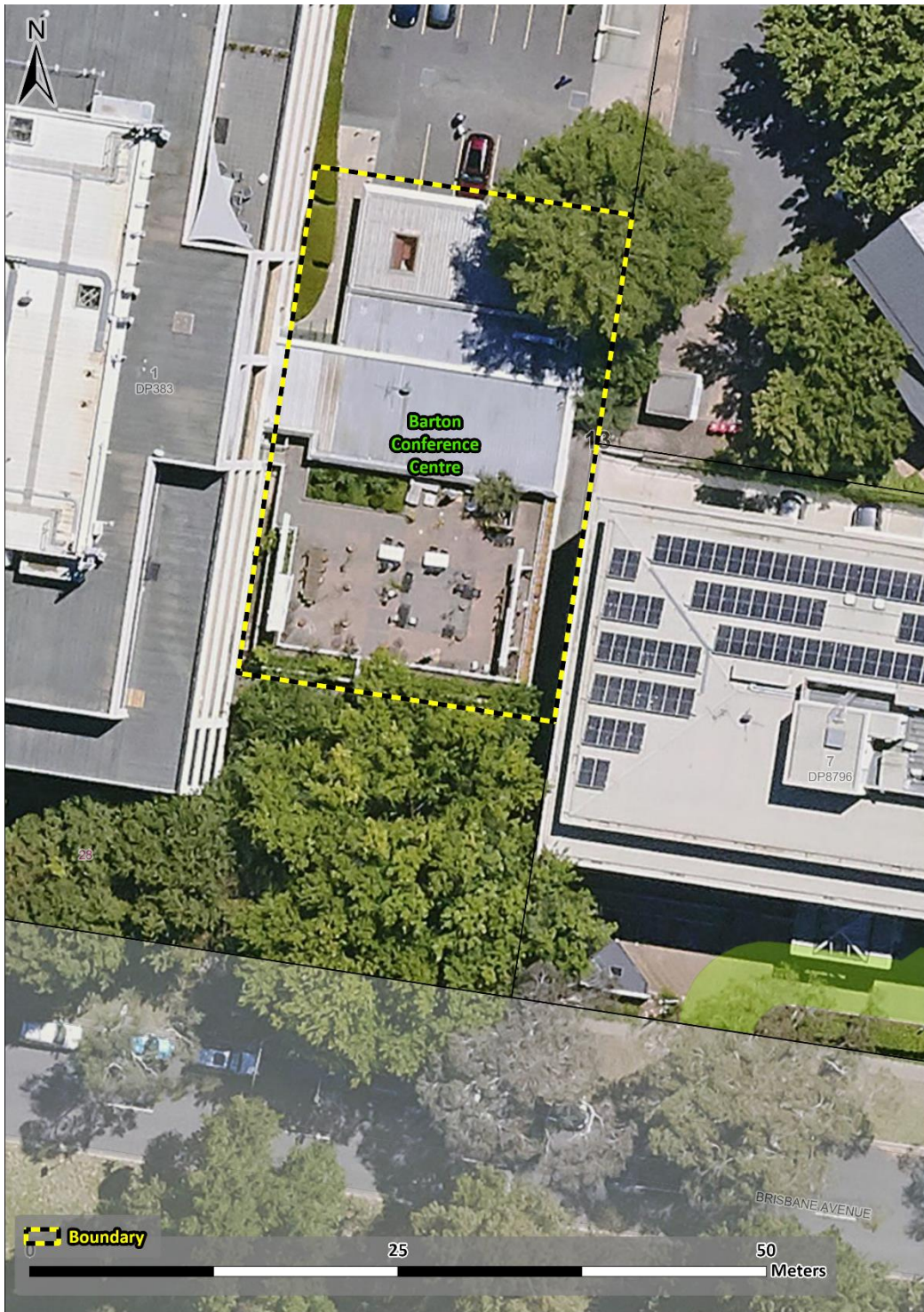


Figure 17 - Place boundary.

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