



ACT Heritage Council

Background Information

Canberra's pre-cast concrete bus shelters

At its meeting of 29 July 2026, the ACT Heritage Council decided that Canberra's Precast Concrete Bus Shelters were eligible for final registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for Canberra's pre-cast concrete bus shelters against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the Heritage Act 2004.

History

The Clem Cummings Series I concrete bus shelters were first installed in Canberra in May 1975 as part of a program to improve Canberra's public transport system and address vandalism. The push to improve Canberra's bus system was part of the 'Canberra experiment' by the federal Whitlam Labor Government: a model for the development of decentralised cities, which was considered integral to their vision of improved access to social services and amenities. This included the provision of efficient public transport systems.

Public bus service for Canberra

In 1969 the National Capital Development Commission's (NCDC) *Growth Strategy Plan* (The Y Plan) was released (NCA, n.d.). The plan was characterised by the creation of 4 separate towns within the metropolitan area, creating functional transport corridors linking the city together. Investment in a comprehensive public transport system was seen as essential to the development of Canberra as part of its Garden City ideals and as a way of inducing public servants to move to the new administrative centre (Saunders, 1994: 5).

The Department of the Interior had responsibility for bus services and the NCDC approved the design of bus shelters, with the new plan marking the end of the old style of timber bus shelters in the ACT (Sparke, 1988: 80, 129, 190).

On 14 February 1977, a new transport system was launched, the ACT Internal Omnibus Network (ACTION), in association with a major program to upgrade the service. This included the purchase of new vehicles, pre-purchased tickets, locally designed and produced concrete bus shelters, and a new bus colour scheme.



Figure 1. Passengers wait by a bus shelter as the ACTION bus driver assists another passenger boarding the bus, ca. 1976 (ACT Heritage Library, 1976, image 003350).

Clement ('Clem') George Cummings 1934-1997

Clement ('Clem') Cummings was born in Cairns, Queensland in 1934. He moved to Canberra in 1953 to attend the Royal Military College at Duntroon, graduating in 1955. After resigning his commission in 1957, Cummings studied architecture at Sydney University, graduating with honours in 1962. He then returned to Canberra to work at the Department of Works. In 1968, Cummings transferred to the Prime Minister's Office where he advised on office refurbishment projects in Melbourne and Sydney. He left the Commonwealth public service and joined private architectural firm, Dirk Bolt Architects and Town Planners in 1971, before establishing his own practice of C.G. Cummings, Architect in the same year. In his own practice, Cummings carried out a wide range of projects including technical advice and the preparation of restoration and conservation plans for the National Trust, the ACT Heritage Committee, and the NSW Heritage Council. In 1978, Cummings received the Housing Industry Association Award for a private residence he designed for the O'Brien family in Garran (Archives ACT, May 2016).

Cummings' work in the design for the concrete bus shelters around Canberra is seen as his most prominent work. Cummings was excited about precast concrete, stating "...this was almost like making sculptures" (Cummings, 2016). His legacy continues in the ACT Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) Clem Cummings Medal, awarded since 2000 to recognise contributions to architecture and the public interest (Goyne, 2020).

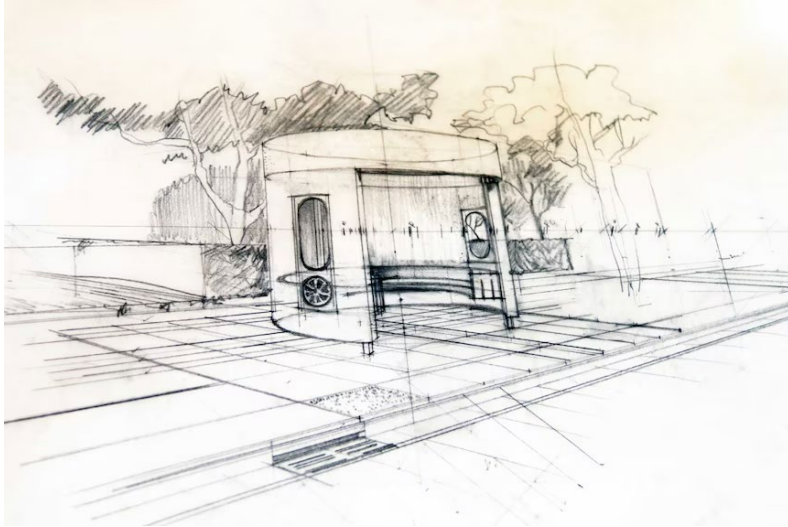


Figure 2. Early sketch of the 1974 bus shelter design by Clem Cummings (ABC Canberra, 2016).

Clem Cummings Series I-V bus shelters

The Clem Cummings Series I concrete bus shelters were first installed in Canberra in May 1975 as part of a program to improve Canberra's public transport system and address vandalism. The push to improve Canberra's bus system was part of the federal Whitlam Government's 'Canberra experiment': a model for the development of decentralised cities, which was considered integral to their vision of improved access to social services and amenities. This included the provision of efficient public transport systems.

By 1975 the government was preparing to expand Canberra's bus network as the city grew by installing the first 100 concrete bus shelters. The first concrete shelter was thought to be installed on Adelaide Avenue (ABC Canberra, 2016) with some sources claiming the first shelter was installed in Lyneham (Archives ACT, May 2016). The shelters were among the first visible signs of the government's new progressive policy of decentralised city planning (Goyne, 2020).

The shelters were manufactured in Queanbeyan by Melocco. The Melocco Brothers are credited with introducing ready-mix concrete to Australia in 1941. Much of their marble and terrazzo work featured in corporate construction in Canberra, including the Belconnen Library (Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2025).

A total of 95 Series I design bus shelters were initially installed around Canberra city in 1975 at a cost of \$2,300 per shelter, or a total of \$218,500, equivalent to \$1.8 million in 2024 (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2025). Shelters were constructed in sand-blasted concrete and glass fibre, with seating for 4 and standing room for 8-9 people (Canberra Times, May 1975). Since their introduction, the shelters have been painted cream in colour, with orange fibreglass window frames and benches, to represent the sunset over the Brindabellas (Archives ACT, 2016).

Following concerns about the initial cost of the shelters, Clem Cummings made minor

amendments to the Series I design, with Series II having precast concrete floors, no backrests for the bench seating and no seats in shelters located near schools. The original design was continually modified over time, although the changes were minimal. From 1976, a special protective 'Vand-I-shield' concrete coating was used which made it easier to remove graffiti from the shelters, however, it required reapplication after cleaning (Archives ACT, 2016). Five different series were produced (Table 1). At least 170 additional shelters were installed throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

Series	Years	Number installed
I	1975-76	98
II	1976-77	52
III	1977-78	55
IV	1978-79	50
V	1979-80	50

Table 1. There were 5 known series of bunker shelters. The changes between series were small and were made to reduce production costs (ACT Bus (n.d.), <https://www.actbus.net/bunker-shelters/>).

By January 1976, the Departmental Co-ordinating Committee felt that the cost of \$2,300 per shelter was unrealistic. The Committee suggested significantly slashing the cost of future bus shelters to \$1,000 each, but the Transport Branch was reluctant to change their bus shelter programme as it took almost three years of work in co-operation with the NCDC to develop the design (Goynes, 2020). By June 1976, the cost of each shelter had increased to \$2,800. While the NCDC noted Cummings's design "is functional and, generally, has been well received", they requested the Department of Construction produce a modified shelter design (Archives ACT, May 2016). Changes to the design included removal of some or all the seating and deletion of the Lexan windows, reducing the cost to \$2,000 per shelter. The NCDC also considered constructing the shelters entirely from fibreglass however the concrete design was retained (ibid).



Figure 3. Three women and three children sit with a pram and a baby stroller in an ACTION bus shelters, ca 1976 (ACT Heritage Library, 1976, image 003347).

Lexan polycarbonate windows on either side of the shelters were repeatedly targeted by vandals, often being burnt or pushed out. Efforts to replace them with vandal-proof alternatives were eventually abandoned. This resulted in the Transport Branch receiving complaints from commuters of cold and drafty conditions (Archives ACT, May 2016). The Transport Branch considered installing wire glass windows, but glaziers advised that these might be more dangerous if shattered (Goynes, 2020). These unresolved design issues eventually resulted in most of the shelters being windowless (Archives ACT 2016).

In 1979, the Transport Branch concluded they could not install the concrete shelters in 66 stop locations due to either space restrictions or visibility issues. The Transport Branch asked the NCDC to assess the sites and design a suitable alternate shelter constructed of a see-through material such as Lexan or possibly a type of unbreakable glass (ACT Bus, n.d.). No alternate design was put forward for several years.

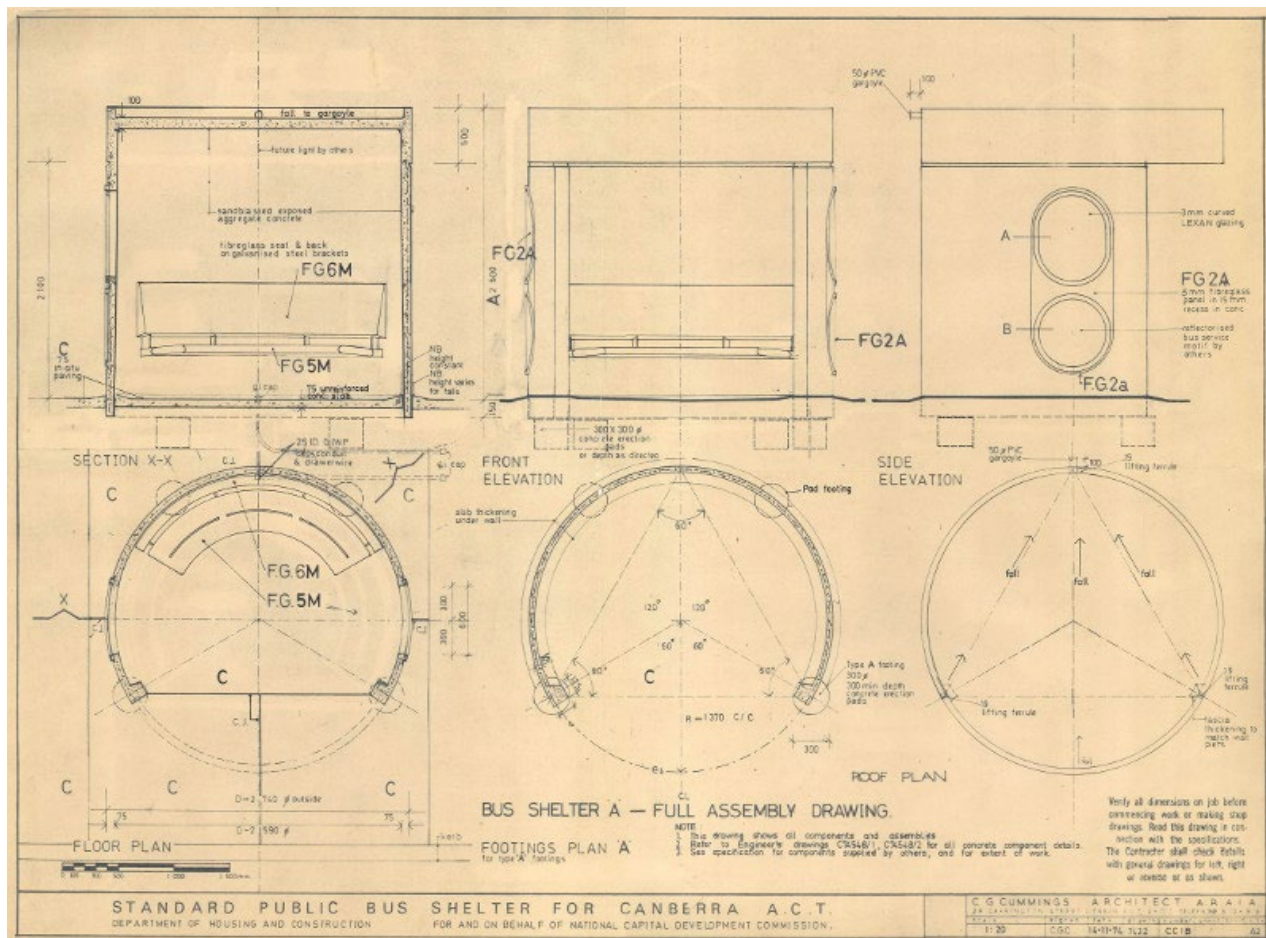


Figure 4. Clem Cummings design for precast concrete bus shelters, 1974, NCDC (Archives ACT).

Alternative designs

During 1984-85, the Public Transit Branch trialled 4 off-the-shelf commercial designs that fitted their previous requirements, but these all proved to be unsatisfactory. By 1987, the NCDC had

become more open to an alternative bus shelter design. In April 1988, the NCDC installed a prototype shelter, which is still in service, on Carruthers Street, in Curtin. It was to be the first of 25 similar shelters installed around Canberra. By October 1988 the NCDC determined the design was too open to the elements and did not proceed, reverting to the Cummings shelters. By 1995, members of the community made requests for more comfortable and compact bus shelters. Since 2007, 64 concrete shelters have been relocated to make way for newer advertising shelters, maintained by a private company. Other shelters were relocated in the mid-2010s when ACTION's bus stops were upgraded to improve their accessibility for people with disability (Roberts, 2019; Bushnell, 2020).

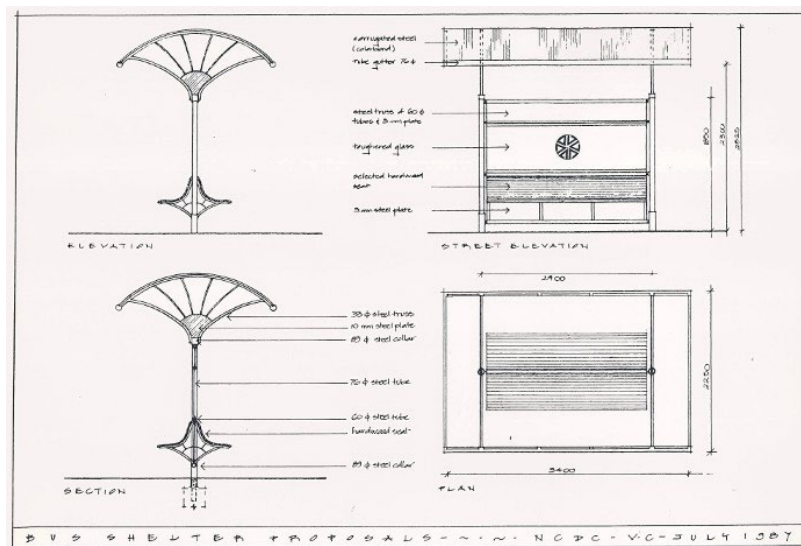


Figure 5. Plans for the 1987 NCDC bus shelter (Archives ACT, 83/1791#02).

Murals and community art

In 1982 ACTION bus driver Brian Cousins came up with the idea of transforming the bus shelters into colourful artworks. ACTION agreed to the concept, hoping it would help to curb vandalism. Archives ACT hold a photographic record of the 1983 murals however no information remains on the mural titles or their locations (Archives ACT, 2016).

In 1987 ACTION expanded the bus shelter painting into an annual competition for schools and community groups. Montone Paint and Wallpaper provided sponsorship by supplying free paint and equipment as well as a \$1,000 prize for the best overall mural. The competition grew in popularity and in 1992 the National Gallery of Australia conducted Special Mural Painting Workshops to assist the entrants. By 1992 around 200 murals had been painted inside bus shelters by primary schools, secondary schools and community groups (Archives ACT, 2015). Bus shelters are still decorated in this way, demonstrating a unique link between community and government, and can be found in Lyons (2022), Denman Prospect (2022), Red Hill (2023) and Macquarie (2024). The community murals have been an important part of fostering stewardship and have been part of the story of acceptance of the bus shelters for more than 40 years.



Figure 6. 'Untitled' by Hawker College, design by Anita Smart (1993 Overall Winner) - Fullagar Crescent, Higgins (Archives ACT, 2015).

Relocatable shelters

In 2016, the original bus shelter plans, thought lost, were rediscovered at the Tuggeranong Bus Depot. Following their discovery, a 2016 audit by the ACT Government's Transport Canberra and City Services recorded 477 bus shelters still on the Canberra bus network, with only around 20 lost during the previous 30 years due to damage and other reasons (Gee 2016).

Several examples of the Canberra concrete bus shelter are found outside of the ACT, with Bredbo, Burradoo and Tallong railway stations in NSW using them as passenger shelters, one in Maitland NSW, several in Goulburn, and an example of 2 modified into a public toilet in Surfers Paradise in Queensland (ACT Bus n.d.; Gee 2016).

Discarded bus shelters are reportedly used as 'smoko' huts at at-least 3 business locations in Canberra. As with many concrete surfaces in Canberra, the bunker shelters have been climbed on, slept in, hidden in, and adapted.

In Ainslie a bunker has been used as a community food pantry, a disused bus shelter in Downer has been repurposed as a community library, while a fallen bus shelter in the north of Canberra is used as a skate surface.



Figure 7. There has been increasing interest in obtaining old bus shelters for landscaping and private use. In some cases, they have been appropriated by the community while waiting for maintenance (Canberra Times, 2020).

Concrete bus shelters have been relocated to new suburbs within Canberra, such as Whitlam and parts of Gungahlin, to link these new neighbourhoods with the wider Canberra community. Weighing around 8 tonnes per shelter, this is a significant exercise, but one which illustrates the importance of the bus shelters to place, identity, and Canberra as a whole.

Despite being seen outside of the ACT, the bus shelters are widely recognised as originating in Canberra and are recognised as distinctive Canberra landmarks and icons (Samaras, 2016). The large number of surviving concrete shelters are a testament to the durability of Cumming's functional design. Over the years, the concrete shelters have become an admired element of Canberra's urban landscape that have withstood the harsh climate and five decades of use (Smith, 2019). The prophetic words of Transport and Housing First Assistant Secretary, J.H. Marshall in 1979 are still true today:

The standard concrete bus shelter has proven to be a sturdy, efficient and attractive structure that generally blends in well with the Canberra scene (Archives ACT, February 2016).

Lighting and accessibility

To increase road safety and decrease vandalism, as well as to respond to community concerns about lighting of the bus shelters, the ACT Government undertook a solar lighting trial at 5 bus shelters in Mitchell in 2021 and an additional 31 locations in 2023. The trial to install low-level lighting within a concrete shelter, aimed to improve personal security for users and contribute towards improved wellbeing for the wider community (ACT Government, 2025). Prior to this trial, bus shelters typically relied on overhead streetlights for ambient lighting.

While glass shelters easily allow for streetlighting to enter the interior of the shelter, the concrete shelter's design does not allow such illumination, resulting in a perception that the

concrete bus shelters can be unsafe at night (Leadsun, 2023).

Bus shelters today must meet disability access requirements, informing seat design, height and available space for wheelchairs. These accessibility considerations have also resulted in some modifications to the concrete floors, paths and access to the bunker shelters. Adaptation of the existing shelters rather than replacement of the older models retains the look and feel of the streetscape whilst addressing community needs.

Public reaction

When first introduced to Canberra streets in 1975, the unique design of the concrete shelters initially attracted some criticism from the public. Letters to the Canberra Times described the new shelters as "concrete monstrosities" and likened them to "orange-spotted fungi", even excusing recent vandalism to the new shelters as perhaps "those responsible for erecting the outrages are now, in remorse, secretly attempting to camouflage them with paint daubs" (Canberra Times, 01 & 12 September 1975). Canberra Times journalist Shirley Despoja merely referred to them as "lunatic."

Despite the initial scorn shown by the community, over fifty years later the bus shelters have become a popular and lucrative icon, identified as synonymous with Canberra and defended by Canberrans. In 2021 the Clem Cummings pre-cast concrete bus shelters were awarded the Sir Roy Grounds Award for Enduring Architecture at the ACT Architecture Awards (Cummings, 2016; AIA, 2021).

Inspiring design

In 2012 artist Trevor Dickinson began sketching Canberra bus shelters. He found and photographed all 484 surviving bus shelters from various angles, at different times of the day and in all seasons and weather conditions (Dale, 2014; Harris, 2018; Brown, 2022). From these images, Dickinson drew pictures of 52 shelters over 2 years. An exhibition of Dickinson's photographs and artworks was held in 2018-19 at Canberra Museum and Gallery, its most popular exhibition to date (CMAG, 2018; Canberra Times, 2020). An ACTION bus was also wrapped in Dickinson's work to promote the exhibition. Dickinson labelled the shelters iconic, likening them to London's telephone boxes (Dickinson, 2020).

Demand for prints of Dickinson's bus shelter work have shown the popularity of the bus shelters. Items emblazoned with bus shelter images have grown in popularity with jewellery, stationery, tattoos, costumes, clothing, socks, 3D printed ornaments, badges, coffee mugs and egg cups available locally and online.

These tributes to the pre-cast concrete bus shelters reinforce the iconic nature of the design and its relationship to the people of Canberra.

Description

Clement ('Clem') George Cummings designed Canberra's pre-cast concrete bus shelters in 1974, for the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC). The design was for a cylindrical shelter made from concrete, with polycarbonate (Lexan) windows on each side, and a fibreglass bench, in a cream and orange colourway to reflect the sunset over the Brindabellas (Archives ACT, May 2016). A feature of the design is their ability to be relocated when required, such as when bus routes alter or new suburbs are built. This feature has allowed the shelters to be reused many times over the 50 years since the first design. Maintenance includes painting, re-bolting and cleaning, as needed. From 1975, over 480 bus shelters were introduced along bus routes. 50 years later over 400 concrete bus shelters remain in Canberra.

Architectural style

While the Canberra concrete bus shelters are smaller in scale than most Brutalist structures, the exposed concrete and geometric design elements are associated with Late Twentieth Century Brutalism (Apperly et al., 1994). The shelters illustrate the broad characteristics of 'chunky' character, with off-form reinforced concrete and free-standing sculptural design. Externally the shelters contain large areas of unbroken wall surface, a form of vertical 'slit' windows, and the use of non-load-bearing precast elements. The simple geometric shape of Cummings' design is instantly recognisable and familiar to Canberrans with its heavy expanses of exposed concrete and virtually no other decorations. The functionalist and modern design serves a practical purpose and complements the garden suburb aesthetic of Canberra's street environment (Scai_Scai, 2012).

The Cummings bus shelters were a practical addition to Canberra, designed to support the city's growth and improve public transportation, which was part of the broader vision laid out in the Griffins' 1912 plan. Cummings incorporated Walter Burley-Griffin's three-point design in his drawings for the iconic shelters, through the angle of opening to a point in the centre of their circular design. While the Griffins' plan did not specifically detail the bus shelters, it did envision a comprehensive network of transportation routes and public spaces, which the bus shelters have helped to facilitate through their enduring functionalism, widespread use, and long history. The concrete bus shelters have a resilience which allows them to be moved when bus routes change, when new suburbs are opened, or when the need arises. This process involves exposing the concrete footings, using cranes to lift and relocate them and once in place, repainting them to bring them to life once again (Coleman, 2022).

Roadside bus stops serve a simple purpose: to show where the bus will stop and to provide some comfort and shelter for waiting passengers, while as a minimum, offering some protection from the weather. With their pre-cast concrete construction, the cylindrical form of the Cummings design evokes a sense of functional modernism reminiscent of some Soviet-era bus stop designs which are thought to have inspired Cummings (Herwig, 2015).



Figure 8. Soviet bus stops (Herwig, 2015).

The map displays the Macquarie region in New South Wales, Australia. It features a network of roads, including the A25, A23, and A15. Key locations and reserves are labeled, such as Macquarie, Gungahra, Macquarie, and Mount Ainslie. The distribution of 100 black dots is concentrated in the central and western parts of the region, particularly around Macquarie and Gungahra.

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