



## ACT Heritage Council

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURT SAMPLE GROUP

#### (part Block 1, Section 7, REID)

At its meeting of 9 April 2015 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Allawah and Bega Court sample group 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 Allawah and Bega Court sample group against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

#### **Public housing in Canberra and the city's early growth and development**

Public housing forms a crucial element in Canberra's history. Unlike other cities, where the main focus of public housing is to provide a minimum level of accommodation for those who cannot afford to provide it for themselves, in Canberra, a large program of public housing established from 1927 has provided housing for all classes of society. It was not until 1972 that the number of privately built dwellings surpassed the number built by government (Wright 2000 p.6).

The Government provided housing in all manner of forms: hostels, hotels, detached residences, and flats. Well before Parliament's first sitting in Canberra in 1927, the Federal Government knew that it would need to provide housing for those relocating to the nation's capital.

In 1912 the Minister for Home and Territories stated that 'it appears that the Government must, therefore, be responsible for housing its officials who are transferred from Melbourne, and who are on a different footing from the commercial population, and will suffer some hardship and inconvenience on their compulsory transfer to the seat of government' (Wright, 2000 p.6).

The Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC) was established in recognition that the pace of work had to be lifted significantly if the Seat of Government were to move to the capital. (Wright, 2000:3) The FCAC, constrained by limited funding, built only 126 houses across four residential subdivisions. It had a little more success building hostels with the completion of Hotel Canberra (now the Hyatt Hotel), Hotel Ainslie (now Gorman House) and hostels in Brisbane Avenue and Telopea Park. (Wright, 2000 p.4)

The Federal Capital Commission (FCC) was established in 1925 and set about providing housing for the expected influx of construction workers and public servants. In the year to 30 June 1927 the FCC approved construction of 545 Government houses. A year later 646 public servants had been transferred to Canberra with office and residential accommodation provided. This included houses, hotel and hostel accommodation (Wright, 2000 p.17).

The Depression was accompanied by a downturn in the transfer program and with the change of Government in 1930, the FCC was wound up and Canberra reverted to divided departmental control. A partly elected ACT Advisory Council was then established to provide residents of the ACT with representation on local matters. ([http://www.library.act.gov.au/find/history/frequentlyaskedquestions/personal\\_stories/act\\_advisory\\_council,\\_1930-1974](http://www.library.act.gov.au/find/history/frequentlyaskedquestions/personal_stories/act_advisory_council,_1930-1974)).

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURT SAMPLE GROUP

By the late 1930s the piecemeal approach to development by the Department of Interior and other responsible agencies was having significant adverse impacts. In February 1939, there were 400 people on the waiting list for government housing in Canberra. Administration was not coping with Canberra's rate of growth (Wright, 2000 p.28).

There were also concerns about approaches to planning and development of the capital. To safeguard the Griffin plan and maintain architectural standards, the National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC) was established as an advisory body to the Minister of the Interior in 1939 (Arc hives ACT Finding Aid 'National Capital Development Commission Records'). This body reviewed and commented on many of the post-war housing development plans until 1958 when the National Capital Development Commission was established.

During World War II construction of Government houses in Canberra was halted leaving Canberra with an estimated shortage of 500 houses through the latter part of the war.

Putting still further pressure on the housing situation, Cabinet decided in 1948 to recommence the program of transferring the public service from Melbourne to Canberra (Wright, 2000 p.29).

In 1955 the Administrative Building (the first public service office block of significant size) was nearing completion. In that year the Government planned to transfer 1,500 public servants from Melbourne to Canberra over three years, and the Department of the Interior estimated a need for 4,000 new dwellings by 1958.

After it became clear that the construction of single housing was not going to meet the growing waiting list for accommodation, alternative housing models were considered. To compound the problem, since World War II building costs had escalated dramatically, there were shortages of materials – which led to rationing arrangements – and a lack of tradesmen. A quick-fix solution was needed. Blocks of flats, which had previously been considered as the cause of congestion and unhealthy conditions, suddenly found favour (Wright, 2000 p.).

### **Construction of housing flats in Canberra**

The provision of public housing over the period of the construction and development of the National Capital is a significant and distinct example of the provision of public housing in Australia. The Commonwealth Government was the predominant provider of housing in Canberra from the 1920s until 1972 when NCDC encouragement of private enterprise construction and the purchase of government houses succeeded in tipping the scales towards private investment in housing (NCDC p. 15)

In the post-war period government housing provision in Canberra entered a new phase of medium density development in response to the decision to complete the transfer of Government departments from Melbourne to Canberra. The NCPDC made a clear distinction between Commonwealth provision of public housing elsewhere in Australia as part of the post-war reconstruction program, and the provision of housing that would meet both the standards of planning and design in the National Capital and the needs of public servants. (41<sup>st</sup> meeting 6-7 October 1944) It was not until the 1970s that provision of public housing in Canberra became more aligned with the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreements concerning low-income social housing (Hutchisonp.50)

The three initial developments to be constructed by the Commonwealth Department of Works and Housing in response to the housing shortages were the Griffith Flats (1948), the Braddon and Reid flats (1951) and the Ainslie Flats (1952). The design of these flats followed Garden City principles, of two storey load bearing brick construction arranged around the edges of long rectangular blocks, facing the surrounding streets, irrespective of solar orientation and with a shared central area. (Graham Brooks and Associates, 2014 p.55)

The Griffith Flats, consisted of 48 two-bedroom units on a rectangular site bounded by Canberra Avenue, Eyre Street, Oxley Street and Dawes Street. The units were spread over eight two-storey blocks, each facing a road frontage with the central area between the blocks containing facilities for car parking and clothes drying.

The Braddon Flats, located on a rectangular site on the northern side of Ainslie Avenue and facing onto Elimatta, Bateman and Gooreen Streets, comprised of eight two-storey buildings containing 48 two-bedroom flats. The Reid flats were directly opposite on a rectangular site facing onto Elimatta, Allambee and Gooreen Streets, comprised 20

one-bedroom units and 28 two-bedroom units. Both complexes comprised eight two-storey blocks, each facing a road frontage with the central area between the blocks containing facilities for car parking and clothes drying.

The Ainslie Flats, located on a rectangular site bounded by Hayley Street, Chisholm Street, Quick Street and Howe Crescent, consisted of 32 one-bedroom units and 56 two-bedroom units. The eight two-storey buildings were arranged to face street frontages with a central area between the blocks containing facilities for car parking and clothes drying.

The construction of the Allawah and Bega Courts (1956/57), the Currong Flats (1959) and the Northbourne Flats (1959) demonstrated a shift in design intent towards modernist site planning techniques and construction. The need for an appropriate architecture for the large commission, and its important location, provided an opportunity to shift away from architectural styles previously employed on housing projects and to experiment with elements and concepts of International Style design and construction techniques. The flats were arranged on their sites to create smaller areas of shared open space with some of the smaller blocks raised on 'pilotis' or columns to allow parking below the buildings. (Graham Brooks and Associates, 2014 p.56)

The Allawah and Bega Courts consisted of eight three-storey blocks of two-bedroom flats. They presented to Cooyong Street as six blocks of 18 flats raised on columns over car parks with laundries under two blocks. Behind this row of blocks, a further ten blocks of 12 flats on the ground formed rectangular courtyards between. The complex demonstrates characteristics of Post-War International Style (1940-1960) including a cubiform overall shape, overhang for shade, plain, smooth wall surfaces, cantilevered balconies and contrasting texture between brick and rendered facades.

The Currong Flats, adjacent to Allawah and Bega Courts (known later as the 'ABC flats') consisted of six eight-storey buildings, comprising 184 one bedroom flats and 28 two bedroom flats. They presented to Currong Street and Ainslie Avenue and also demonstrated some aspects of the Post-War International Style, such as cubiform overall shape, overhangs for shade, plain smooth wall surfaces, cantilevered balconies and contrasting textures. (Graham Brooks and Associates, 2014 p.66)

The Northbourne Flats consisted of 24 three-bedroom, 154 two-bedroom and 70 one-bedroom flats located on two sites, in Turner and Braddon, facing each other across Northbourne Avenue. The development on the Turner side of Northbourne Avenue is bounded by Condimine Street, Forbes Street and Greenway Street and the development on the Braddon side of Northbourne Avenue is bounded by Henty Street and the boundaries of Haig Park and the Canberra Rex Hotel. The complex consists of two building blocks types, both 3 storeys high – those that contain two-bedroom flats with the one-bedroom flats attached by glazed links and those that contain three-bedroom flats. The Flats exhibit some features of the Post-War International Style (1940-60) such as cubiform overall shape, plain, smooth wall surfaces and exposure of structure frames.

Allawah and Bega Courts were initiated and completed during the period in which the NCPDC was the advisory body. The Currong and the Northbourne Flats were initiated at the same time but completed by the NCDC after it came into operation in 1958. With queues for housing growing and more transfers planned, Stuart Flats, Lachlan Court and Gowrie Court were priority construction projects in the NCDC's first two years.

The Stuart Flats, Griffith constructed in 1959 continued the overall site planning arrangement evident in the Allawah and Bega Courts and the Northbourne Housing Precinct, although located on a steeply sloping site which resulted in less clarity of the parking and common areas. Furthermore their architectural expressions remained in the restrained Inter-War Georgian style. (Graham Brooks and Associates, 2014 p.56)

The Stuart Flats consisted of 29 bedsitters and 117 two-bedroom flats on a site bounded by Captain Cook Crescent, Stuart Street, Light Street, Evans Crescent and the boundaries of St Paul's Cathedral, the Russian Embassy and private flats. The units are spread over 12 separate blocks varying in height from two to four storeys plus part basement with some blocks raised on concrete frames to provide covered car parking. The central open space between the blocks contained additional car parking and drying areas however landscaping was minimal. There is little evidence of any strong concept, architectural style or a considered approach to site planning in the design of these buildings despite being designed in the highly regarded office of Spencer, Hanson and Partner.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURT SAMPLE GROUP

Gowrie Court, Narrabundah, constructed in 1959, broke away from the 'donut' planning model partly due to the site not being surrounded by roadways. It demonstrates some architectural influences of the Post-War International style such as low pitched roof and overall cubist form. (Graham Brooks and Associates 2014 p.56)

Gowrie Court consisted of 72 two-bedroom units in series of separate, three-storey blocks that ran parallel with each other for optimum solar orientation. This was in contrast to the early 1950s flats that were two-storeys high, and flanked all four boundaries of their sites regardless of individual orientation. Other evidence of the shift to a more modern, International Style-influenced approach is exemplified by the very low pitch to the roof, accentuating the rectangular, cubist form of the blocks. In another modernist tendency, the crisp, planar form is offset visually by the white-painted cantilevered balconies, which regularly punctuate the main facades.

Lachlan Court, Barton also constructed in 1959 was of interest for its use of 'no-fines' concrete in place of typical load bearing brickwork. The complex consisted of 118 bedsitters over four separate buildings, one one-bedroom caretakers' cottage, a restaurant, central laundrette and 41 garages on a site bounded by Brisbane Avenue, Macquarie Street, Darling Street and National Circuit. In 1999 Lachlan Court was sold by the ACT Government and subsequently demolished for redevelopment.

The construction of the Red Hill Public Housing Precinct in 1961 demonstrated another shift in the planning layout of public housing towards the Post-War International style and were part of a group housing project, an idea discussed earlier by the NCPDC for new subdivisions, a similar scheme which would be evident in the future Northbourne Housing Precinct. This project consisted of a total of 145 dwellings in a variety of housing types including flats, bed-sitter units, houses and townhouses. The majority of the precinct is bounded by La Perouse Street, Discovery Street, Monaro Crescent and Cygnet Crescent with a smaller section being located outside that perimeter on the other side of Cygnet Crescent. The nine blocks follow the gently sloping topography, street pattern on a symmetrical, semi-formal, curved radial layout set out in a series of radial wings which results in a series of open spaces. The buildings however made no reference to the Post-War International style.

The NCDC's construction of the Northbourne Housing Precinct, between 1959 - 62 was a much more ambitious architectural undertaking along the avenue that was the main entrance to Canberra. This project established a significant difference to its predecessors in terms of the use of the variety of building types and group layouts, and proved more confident in its adoption of the Post-War International style. (Graham Brooks and Associates, 2014 p.57)

The Northbourne Housing Precinct stretches some 500 metres along Northbourne Avenue in Dickson and Lyneham and consists of five building types, comprising one, two, three and four storey buildings with variety of housing types including bachelor flats, two-storey paired houses and maisonettes. The Precinct was considered by the NCDC as a 'gateway' marking the entrance into the National Capital. The prominence and consideration given to its landmark status were novel qualities in Canberra's public housing, as previous examples were primarily considered as a quick response to housing shortages.

Subsequent medium density public housing, such as Kanangra Court, Reid took a different approach to architectural and site planning.

Kanangra Court, Reid completed in 1965 demonstrated some domestic qualities of private houses associated with the Sydney Regional Style (1960- ) such as scale, footprint shape, massing, proportion of windows, detailing and building materials. Originally comprised of 118 bachelor flats over seven three-storey blocks, the flats have since been modified into two-bedroom flats. Bounded by Ainslie Avenue, Limestone Avenue, Allambie Street and Goren Street the buildings are set in an open landscaped area with covered carports and screened drying areas.

By the mid 1970s demand for government housing in Canberra had dropped significantly. The Government decided that building large flat complexes exclusively for occupation by government housing tenants was over, and that low-cost housing should be developed for the increasing number of tenants on welfare and aged pensioners. (Philip Leeson Architects 2011 p.319).

Jerilderie Court, Reid completed in 1977 demonstrated this new phase in intent and design approach to public housing in Canberra. Developed in response to lobbying for low cost accommodation it was designed in response to a 'places' context rather than a conscious exercise in any specific architectural style. It contains a total of 62 dwellings within nine blocks ranging from two to three storeys in height. Dwelling types include three-bedroom townhouses, single-

storey garden units, maisonettes and mews-style units with car parking provided at ground level under some blocks, in group carports and in open parking spaces. The units are bounded by Ainslie Avenue, Allambee Street, Doonkuna Street and Elimatta Street.

### **The planning and development of Allawah and Bega Courts**

The Allawah and Bega Courts, twin developments facing Ballumbir Street, were the result of the mid 1950s attempts to house growing public service numbers in Canberra. Allawah Court, consisting of 114 two-bedroom flats, was completed in 1956 and Bega Court, also consisting of 114 two-bedroom flats, was completed the following year. (Freeman, 2009:3:4)

Design work by the Commonwealth Department of Works commenced in 1953, and the architects involved included Richard Ure as Principal Architect, Bruce Litchfield as Supervising Architect and Ian Slater and Project Architect. (Freeman, 2009:3:5)

At the July 1953 meeting of the National Capital Planning and Development Committee (NCPDC), Richard Ure, and Mr Miller, Principal Architect of the Department of Works, made a very comprehensive presentation of what were then known as the 'Braddon Flats'. John Overall, Chief Government Architect, also attended the presentation. Three alternative sketch proposals were presented, that had been prepared by the Department architects in Sydney in collaboration with the Canberra office. The sketch designs contained site locality, contour plans, general layout, elevations, aerial perspective and external perspectives and supplemented by data including site analysis and accommodation schedules. (Philip Leeson Architects 2010 p.13)

Overall declared his preference for the scheme which placed three-storey blocks along Cooyong Street and eight-storey blocks set back from Currong Street. He felt that this scheme would be 'an attractive addition to the architecture of Canberra'. Overall and his colleagues promoted the benefits of developed Section 7, Reid (just across Ainslie Avenue) with similar residential flats at a later stage to create a 'balanced development'. (Leeson, 2010:15) The NCPDC agreed with Overall's preference and resolved that the proposal be adopted as the basis for further design development. It was also considered to be advantageous to stage the development of the project into separate blocks. The development was ultimately staged over three years. (Philip Leeson Architects 2010 pp. 17-19)

By mid 1954, tenders were being called for the first stage of the project, Allawah Court. (Freeman, 2009:3:5) Allawah court was completed in 1956, and in 1957 a mirror development was completed to be known as Bega Court. (Philip Leeson Architects 2010 p.19)

In 1957 Overall was appointed Commission of the newly established National Capital Development Committee (NCDC) and in 1959 the eight-storey units on Section 52 Braddon were completed, to be known as the Currong Flats.

The accommodation provided by the Allawah, Bega and Currong developments combined came to a total of 184 one-bedroom flats and 256 two-bedroom flats. (Leeson, 2010:20). It represented the first major housing project in the Federal Capital since the Federal Capital Commission(FCC) type houses and precinct developments of the late 1920s. (Freeman, 2009:4.1)

Because of the high level of scrutiny that the NCPDC applied to all aspects of the Allawah and Bega Courts, together with the adjacent Currong Apartments, it is clear that this was considered to be a significant undertaking. This appears to have been due to the larger scale, higher density and prominent location. (Philip Leeson Architects 2010 p.11)

In spite of its best intentions, and the importance that the NCPDC attached to this housing scheme, the architectural quality of these buildings was limited by a number of factors throughout the design process. These factors include the initial decision that the flats would be designed within the Department of Works, limited resources, strict budget restrictions and in some instances, the conservative nature of the Committee itself. (Philip Leeson Architects 2010 p.30)

An extensive renovation and upgrading program in the late 1990s brought the inner-city flats up to modern standards. (Freeman, 2009:3:4)

## **DESCRIPTION**

### **Site Planning and Building Layout**

The Allawah and Bega Courts are located on two sites across Ainslie Avenue adjacent to the city centre. One site is in the suburb of Braddon, while the other is in Reid (Block 1 Section 52, Braddon and Block 1 Section 7, Reid). The buildings are set at ninety degrees to each other, facing a variety of orientations, resulting in semi enclosed courtyards between blocks.

The buildings are organised into two main groups, both consisting of three stories, however one type is raised on columns.

### **Architecture**

The Allawah and Bega Courts have been designed in the Post-War International Style (1940-1960). The attributes of the style the courts partially demonstrate include:

- Cubiform overall shape;
- Expression of structural frame;
- Large sheets of glass;
- Plain, smooth wall surfaces; and
- Contrasting texture.

Elements of the style the courts do not demonstrate include:

- True curtain walls;
- Contrasting non-rectangular shapes;
- Original sun-control devices;
- Cantilevered elements; and
- Overhangs for shade.

The courts are uniformly detailed and finished with rendered external walls, exposed face brick, flat metal roofs and aluminium framed glazing.

### **Landscaping**

The planning of the Allawah and Bega Courts form a consistent layout of dwellings and open landscaped courtyard spaces. Open areas consists of a combination of open grassed areas, concrete areas set amongst a number of mature trees.

There is an obvious consistency in the planted trees and understory vegetation.

Playgrounds have been installed in some of the open courtyards.

### **Physical condition and integrity**

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION – ALLAWAH AND BEGA COURT SAMPLE GROUP

An external inspection of the courts was conducted by ACT Heritage on 9 October 2014. Overall the courts remain relatively intact in terms of physical condition and integrity in relation to extant buildings and planning layout. The physical condition of the buildings and its landscape relating to general maintenance is considered to be in good condition, and as expected of buildings of that age.

The sense of entity, in relation to its original purpose to house relocated public servants, is no longer evident within the buildings.

Several additions, acknowledged as practical requirements, are evident throughout the Allawah and Bega Courts and are do compromise the design integrity of the original concept. These additions include:

- Brick walls along Cooyong Street boundary;
- Sun control devices (metal louvers) to external balconies;
- Steel fences and gates; and
- Pergolas.

The external render to Allawah Court is currently painted 'cream' in colour, and the Bega Court external render is currently painted 'pink' in colour.

The original landscaping design, centred around landscaped communal open areas remains evident throughout the courts with the trees appearing to have matured well.



SITE PLAN

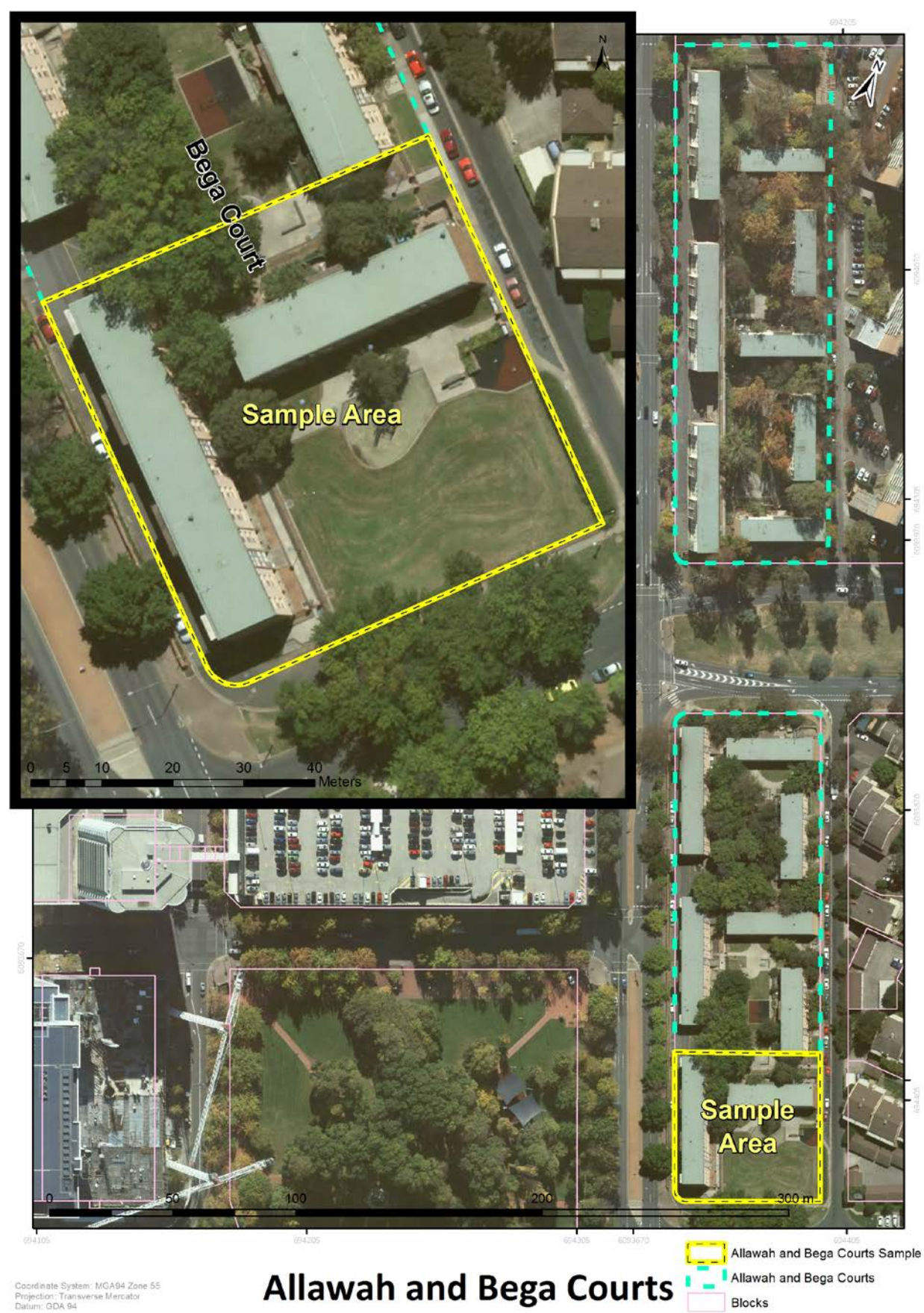


Image 1 Allawah and Bega Courts, sample group nominated boundary.



**IMAGES**



**Image 2** Bega Court, demonstrating inclusion of children's play area and metal fencing (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)



**Image 5** Bega Court, demonstrating undercroft columns, mature trees and the inclusion of brick walls and metal fencing to the boundary (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)



**Image 3** Allawah Court, demonstrating inclusion of brick walls to the boundary (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)



**Image 6** Allawah Court, demonstrating undercroft columns, central courtyard space, mature trees and the inclusion of metal fencing (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)



**Image 4** Allawah Court, demonstrating undercroft columns, mature trees and the inclusion of brick walls to the boundary (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)



**Image 7** Allawah Court, demonstrating undercroft columns with central courtyard space behind and modern sun control devices (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)



**Image 8** Bega Court, demonstrating central grassed open space and inclusion of metal fencing (Source: ACT Heritage, 2014)

## REFERENCES

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