

The Robertsons' House, Oaks Estate – A new lease of life?

In the 2010-2011 ACT Budget an allocation was given towards conservation works on several buildings assessed as having heritage significance or potential heritage significance. The Robertsons' house and land at 9 Hazel Street, Oaks Estate, was identified as one of the places to receive funding.

In 1895 Amelia Southwell received the title to two blocks in Oaks Estate. Some eighteen years later Walter Richard (Dick) and Mary Robertson acquired a lease of the land and began building their first house. The young Robertsons were not rich but were possessed of a strong determination and ability to make the best of what they had.

They did not have access to a wide range of building materials in the first decades of the 20th century. In 1914, just after they settled on the blocks, Australia entered the First World War and commercially manufactured building materials became even more inaccessible. The result was that a variety of makeshift materials were used. These were acquired from a number of sources and included packing cases, flat iron off-cuts from various construction jobs (including Parliament House), bricks and flattened kerosene tins. As their family grew (they raised eight children in the house) the Robertsons continued to work on their home through the post-war years, the Great Depression and into the Second World War using what materials were at hand and affordable.

They utilised their large yard by building a shed facing Hazel Street, a workshop and laundry next to the house, a vegetable patch and an orchard. They also built a brick chook house with a tiled roof. The chook house has the grand fame of being the first tiled roof structure in Oaks Estate. It still stands today. During the Second World War Dick dug out an air raid shelter next to the workshop. This was later filled in.

Following acquisition of the Oaks Estate land by the Commonwealth Government and the death of Dick and Mary their son, Les Robertson, held a lease on the property. Following his death the property was returned to the ACT Government and remained vacant for a number of years. Although it suffered structural deterioration and vandalism during this period it remained largely intact.

The house is classified by the National Trust. The statement of significance reads in part:

The house is a rare example in the ACT urban area of vernacular construction. It maintains a high degree of integrity. It represents a distinctive way of life during the establishment and growth of the Federal capital. The house has strong historic and social associations with the growth of Oaks Estate and Queanbeyan. The grounds of No 9 Hazel Street contain mature landscape elements of trees, shrubs, remnant fruit trees and fences, which reflect the historic development of the place.

Despite its identified heritage significance the house was in danger of deteriorating past the point of no return. In

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From the President

A Case for the National Trust

I write this at a time of substantial debate about the future of the National Trust, its role in the 21st century, funding difficulties and trying to resolve a coordinated national function.

The National Trust's 2010 membership survey revealed that:

- less than 1% of members are 18 to 24 years old;
- 1% are 25 to 34 years old;
- 8% are 35 to 49 years old;
- 36% are 50 to 64 years old; and
- 54% are 65 years old or over.

On the reason for joining the National Trust:

- 9% joined to save money;
- 31% to keep heritage places;
- 25% to visit heritage places;
- 14% to travel overseas; and
- 21% for local heritage.

These figures do indicate a case for the National Trust in that more than 50% of members join to protect heritage places or for local heritage.

The ACT National Trust has established a strong force for ACT heritage in engaging with local communities, particularly when places of heritage value are threatened. This is illustrated by our role in recent activities such as assisting Friends of the Albert Hall in protecting and conserving it, our support for a survey to establish the social significance of Flynn Primary School designed by Enrico Taglietti, our voice in reinforcing the need to conserve and use the Kingston Fitters' Workshop in a manner consistent with the Conservation Plan, and working with Residents' Associations on ongoing threats to conservation areas and their integrity.

We are also a key contact on heritage issues for the ACT Planning Authority and Directorates and the National Capital Authority. We comment on issues before both levels of government, participate in consultation and are often invited into reference groups.

However these activities take time and effort. We rely on a number of volunteers but to be effective we need three office staff (Chris Wain ED, Bethany Lance, Research Officer, and Liz McMillan, Office Manager) to coordinate, prepare and manage our input.

The National Trust is in a rare position as contributions to the National Trust are tax-deductible. This has led to the establishment of conservation funds for three iconic Canberra churches (St Andrew's, St John's and All Saints) where we work with the church communities to conserve their valuable heritage assets. We are discussing opportunities to expand this activity with others.

In a city with two overlapping bureaucracies (ACT and Federal) the independence and community voice of the National Trust are critical to ensuring reasoned debate and due process in the protection of our heritage. We must expand our networks, work with other organisations, and maximise our output and impact with minimum resources if we are going to protect our past and heritage for our children.

As government funds become tighter and there is what appears to be greatly reduced attention for heritage, the

fact, an architectural report on the house concluded that it had reached such a point and recommended that it be demolished along with the outbuildings (including the unique chook house).



The chook house. The oldest tiled building in Oaks Estate

Fortunately this report was not acted upon and subsequent assessments concluded that because of the very mixed fabrics used to construct the house it was worthy of saving. The reports also acknowledged the significance in its association with a family who, while not prominent in the development of Canberra, nevertheless epitomised a large proportion of the population who struggled through their early years of marriage, and endured the oppressive conditions of the First World War, the subsequent Great Depression and the Second World War while raising a family.

The funding from the ACT Government has now been put to good use. A set of conservation policies and a condition report were drawn up in early 2011 to guide conservation works. Work commenced in mid-2011. The work was done under the philosophy of doing as much work as necessary but replacing as little of the original fabric as possible. In this way the conservation work has now arrested the deterioration and given the house (and the chook house) a new lease of life. And this wonderful place, with its history written into its walls, has been saved.



Conservation works begin. The grounds have been cleared and the protective fence is being erected

But what now? While the structures have been conserved they will probably never be brought up to the statutory standards required for permanent occupation. The policies written for the conservation works recognized this and

recommended that an interpretation strategy for the use of the house should be developed. The strategy will provide for public understanding and appreciation of the site and its role and significance in the history of the ACT. The policies also encourage a partnership group to be developed which would act as a custodian for the place and develop ways in which the house and grounds could be presented to the public on specific occasions. The custodians would of course include representatives of Oaks Estate residents.

There is a future for the Robertsons' house but exactly what it will be is still largely to be determined.

Peter Dowling

Peter Dowling is the National Heritage Officer for the Australian Council of National Trusts. He was the author of the conservation policies for the Robertsons' house.



A conserved building. Ready for a new future

(Photos courtesy of Dianne Dowling)



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