



REGISTER OF HERITAGE PLACES - ASSESSMENT DOCUMENTATION

11. ASSESSMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The criteria adopted by the Heritage Council in November 1996 have been used to determine the cultural heritage significance of the place.

PRINCIPAL AUSTRALIAN HISTORIC THEME(S)

- 4.1.2 Making suburbs
- 7.5.9 Providing services and Welfare

HERITAGE COUNCIL OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA THEME(S)

- 108 Government Policy
- 404 Community services and utilities

11.1 AESTHETIC VALUE*

Due to its site planning, moderate proportions, careful massing, contrasting materials, considered detailing and generally high quality of architectural design, the place is a good example of public housing in the Post-War International style. (Criterion 1.1)

The position of the blocks to create a north facing landscaped area and the landscape treatments of the site, designed by prominent landscape architect John Oldham, contribute to the aesthetic quality of the development. (Criterion 1.1)

The economical yet effective detailing of *Graham Flats* demonstrates design innovation. (Criterion 1.2)

By being set back from the street, and having a north-facing landscaped area which retains its original style and ambience, the place displays precinctual qualities. (Criterion 1.4)

11.2. HISTORIC VALUE

The construction of *Graham Flats* was a serious attempt to provide purpose built public housing for a particular community group. It demonstrates a period of social consciousness by the government. (Criterion 2.2)

The place illustrates contemporary attitudes towards the housing and care of elderly pensioners and represents an early attempt by the Western Australian State Government in providing public housing for different household types

* For consistency, all references to architectural style are taken from Apperly, Richard; Irving, Robert and Reynolds, Peter *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture: Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus & Robertson, North Ryde, 1989.

close to the centre of the city during a time of rapid population growth; (Criterion 2.2)

The place is associated with Herbert Ernst Graham, Minister for Housing 1953-1959 in the State Labor Government after whom it was named in appreciation of his efforts in providing accommodation for pensioners. (Criterion 2.3)

Prominent landscape designer, John Oldham was responsible for the design of the landscaped grounds, which contain many local plant species. Oldham's philosophy of providing a calming and restful space for residents and visitors, including nearby workers, remains a feature of the place and contributes to its social value. (Criterion 2.3)

The place was designed by Neville Coulter, design architect, of the State Housing Commission. (Criterion 2.3)

A reference to the first use of super six sheeting to erect a fence on the site makes this place significant because of the subsequent wide-spread usage of this product throughout the State. (Criterion 2.4)

11. 3. SCIENTIFIC VALUE

11. 4. SOCIAL VALUE

The landscape design by John Oldham has value for its attempt to make the exterior a calming and restful place in which the residents could relax either by themselves or with friends and incorporated many local plant species into his design. (Criterion 4.1)

Graham Flats is valued by the people who have lived there over a period of time, some having been residents in the apartment block for over 50 years. (Criteria 4.1 & 4.2)

The wide usage of the gardens by both residents and visitors, including nearby workers, demonstrates the continuing contribution of *Graham Flats* to the community's sense of place. (Criterion 4.2)

12. DEGREE OF SIGNIFICANCE

12. 1. RARITY

12. 2 REPRESENTATIVENESS

Graham Flats is a good example of Post-War International Style public housing. (Criterion 6.1)

12. 3 CONDITION

Graham Flats are in need of routine maintenance. In a number of places on the cantilevered accessways and balconies, particularly near construction joint locations, the balustrade has corroded, resulting in significant concrete deterioration. The concrete deterioration amounts to approximately one square metre of concrete accessway and balcony edges, located typically on the southern elevations. The amount of concrete deterioration varies, but in each location is up to 1200 mm long, 100 mm vertically, and 100 mm deep,

exposing reinforcing bars and balustrade base plates. In general, however, the condition of *Graham Flats* is fair.

12. 4 INTEGRITY

The integrity of *Graham Flats* is high, as the original intention, that of public housing, has remained intact.

12. 5 AUTHENTICITY

The authenticity of *Graham Flats* is high. Where modifications have occurred, such as the glazing of some balconies and the installation of a lift, little original fabric was removed.

13. SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

The documentary evidence has been compiled by Prue Griffin, Historian. The physical evidence has been compiled by John Loreck, Architect.

13. 1 DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Graham Flats comprises two three-storey buildings of brick and corrugated iron. The complex was designed by the State Housing Commission of Western Australia to provide accommodation for pensioners and State Housing Commission tenants. Construction was undertaken by Sloan Construction and the Premier A. R. G. Hawke opened the building on 19 December 1958.¹

In the aftermath of World War Two, Perth experienced a severe housing shortage as Western Australia experienced high birth rates and attracted many migrants. The State Housing Commission (SHC) received many applications for assistance and it was often the case that people waited years for subsidised accommodation. As the SHC Commissioner, A. E. Clare stated at the opening of *Graham Flats*, 'the last family living in an old army hut in the state had been moved out yesterday'.² In this climate the SHC turned to constructing multi storey flats, a decision that was not always popular with the public. In 1956 significant public debate occurred over the construction of Wandana Flats in Subiaco. This complex had at its centre a ten-storey building which was the first multi storey flat development in Western Australia. One of the key instigators of this project was Herb Graham, the Minister for Housing in the Hawke Labor State Government from 1953 to 1959.³

From the time of his election to State Parliament in 1943, Herbert Ernst Graham showed a keen interest in housing policy.⁴ By the late 1950s, the supply of Public Housing was catching up with demand but it was realised that the housing was not always appropriate for pensioners. Graham wanted to address this issue with a more appropriate building style, particularly for the elderly.⁵

¹ Plaque at Graham Flats.

² *The West Australian*, 19 December 1958, p. 15.

³ David Black and Geoffrey Bolton, *Biographical Register of Members of Parliament of WA, Vol. 2, 1930-1990*, Legislative Assembly Offices, Perth, 1990, p. 59.

⁴ Battye Library, MN 1156, Acc 3456A, Newspaper Clippings collected by H. E. Graham.

⁵ Battye Library, MN 1156, Acc 3456A, *Sunday Times*, 14 December 1958.

The land upon which *Graham Flats* is located was purchased by the State government in 1898 for the Ministry of Education.⁶ In 1959, ownership was transferred to the State Housing Commission, following completion of *Graham Flats*.⁷

The choice of this location for pensioner accommodation was based on its proximity to the city and public transport. West Perth was still a residential suburb in the 1950s. However, flat accommodation had become commonplace in the area since the 1930s. In some cases, new buildings had been constructed, but in many instances mansions in the area had been converted to flats. Flat building in the city was given further impetus by the Stephenson-Hepburn plan for the metropolitan area.⁸

In 1957, a Perth Technical College student project produced designs for the site. One of the judges of the designs was Harold Krantz, the architect of Wandana Flats and the senior partner in the firm Krantz and Sheldon, designers of flats in Perth from the 1930s.⁹ Some interesting student designs were put forward in the Post War International Style; however, the final design for *Graham Flats* was completed 'in house' by the State Housing Commission. The chief architect was William Tracey and the design architect Neville Coulter.¹⁰ Construction of *Graham Flats* was undertaken by Sloan Construction for £150 000 and was completed four months ahead of schedule.¹¹

One of the most significant features of the *Graham Flats* design was the landscaping by John Oldham. His comments in a feature article about *Graham Flats* record that he wished to make the exterior a calming and restful place in which the residents could relax either by themselves or with friends. He also attempted to incorporate many local plant species into his design.¹²

One innovation at *Graham Flats* that was subsequently copied state wide was the first use of corrugated fibro super six sheets set vertically in the ground with no posts or rails to separate the laundry area from the garden.¹³

The opening ceremony on 19 December 1958 took place before invited guests and the media. The speakers all acknowledged that the Housing Minister had 'been the moving spirit in the erection of the flats'.¹⁴ As Premier A. R. G. Hawke stated, 'the opening was a celebration of community social consciousness'.¹⁵ The Premier went on to state that;

there was a growing consciousness of the need to give more thought, care and practical help to assist elderly people to find more comfort and happiness in their later years.

⁶ Certificate of Title, Vol. 114, Fol. 91, Department of Land Administration.

⁷ Crown Grant, Vol. 1215, Fol. 731., Department of Land Administration.

⁸ Stephenson, G & Hepburn, J A, 'Plan for the Metropolitan Region, Perth and Fremantle, Western Australia, 1955: a report prepared for the Government of Western Australia', Government Printing Office, Perth, 1955.

⁹ 'The Architect', June 1957, p. 27.

¹⁰ Plans held by Ministry of Housing.

¹¹ *The West Australian*, 19 December 1958, p. 15

¹² Battye Library, MN 1156, Acc 3456A, *Sunday Times*, 14 December 1958.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

Every effort should be made to give them a more positive outlook, and to let them know other people were interested in their well-being.¹⁶

The contribution of *Graham Flats* toward the accommodation of pensioners in Western Australia can be seen in the fact that at the opening approximately 600 homes for pensioners were allocated throughout the state. Of the 70 units in *Graham Flats*, 50 were allocated to pensioner couples. *Graham Flats* provided approximately 7% of the SHC accommodation for pensioners across the state.¹⁷

It was the contribution of Graham that led to his name being chosen for the new flats. A plaque in the lounge/reading room of *Graham Flats* erected by the Australian Pensioner League formally acknowledges his efforts. The plaque reads 'after whom this building has been named in appreciation of his efforts in providing accommodation for pensioners'.¹⁸ His name was not used to describe the flats during the early planning stages in 1957, however the inclusion of the name in the building design indicates the name was decided on well before completion.¹⁹

The design features that were highlighted as appropriate for pensioners were the seating in the showers, electric dryers in the laundries and the open shelving in the kitchens instead of cupboards. Major design faults such as the lack of a lift were commented on within the first twelve months. Complaints were made in the press about the 'shabby planning' that made elderly people carry their shopping up two flights of stairs and carry washing to the facilities on the ground floor.²⁰ This situation was not remedied until 1987 with the addition of a lift in the centre of the complex.²¹

Some eighteen months after opening, the opposition spokesman on housing attacked the Minister stating that a much smaller proportion of tenants at *Graham Flats* were pensioners. The Minister defended the ratio of pensioners to other tenants stating that 44 of the 70 units were occupied by pensioners. The top floor was allocated to regular SHC tenants.²²

Despite the problems with the stairs, residents at *Graham Flats* developed a strong community spirit. Within twelve months of construction an active social committee was organising weekly get togethers and film evenings. Pensioners and tenants from the top floor were welcome.²³ The venue for these get togethers was the recreation room which still is used today.

During the latter half of the 20th century West Perth has developed into an extension of the Perth central business district. Offices and restaurants now dominate the suburb with only a minority of residential buildings.

Graham Flats has changed minimally since its construction. Physical evidence shows that 75 flats exist in the complex however the original documents only

16 *ibid.*

17 *ibid.*

18 Plaque in the lounge/reading room of *Graham Flats*.

19 Battye Library, Acc 2553, SHC file 5127/57.

20 Battye Library, MN 1156, Acc 3456A, Newspaper Clippings, *Weekend Mail*, 28 February 1959.

21 Certificate of Registration of Inspection, 8 December 1987, located on 2nd floor *Graham Flats*.

22 Battye Library, MN 1156, Acc 3456A, Newspaper Clippings, *The West Australian*, 2 July 1960.

23 *ibid.*, *The West Australian*, 18 December 1959.

refer to 70 flats. Some internal rearrangement may have taken place however no records of such changes have been located.²⁴

Residents of *Graham Flats* are clients of the Ministry of Housing, which undertakes the duties of the former State Housing Commission and its later namesake Homeswest. Many of the residents are elderly pensioners which demonstrates a consistent use of the building since its construction. The gardens facing Hay Street at *Graham Flats* are used by the workers in the vicinity for informal gatherings and eating lunches.

13.2 PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

The triple-storey *Graham Flats* is situated on the south-west corner of Hay and Colin Streets, West Perth. On the opposite side of Hay Street is a row of single storey terrace shops. Immediately to the west of *Graham Flats* is No. 1251 Hay street, a double-storey building. To the south of *Graham Flats* addressing Richardson Street are office buildings, generally two to three stories in height. To the south of *Graham Flats* on Colin Street is a three-storey building at 51-53 Colin Street. Across Colin Street to the east are, from south to north, a single-storey building, a triple-storey building and another single-storey building. Diagonally opposite *Graham Flats*, on the north-east corner of Colin and Hay Streets, is the Ross Memorial Church.

Graham Flats is set back from Hay and Colin Streets, and is landscaped with mature eucalyptus trees, rubber trees, conifers and Jacarandas, set in an extensive grassed area partially bordered by low brick walls. A row of Liquid Ambers, about six to eight metres in height, is planted along Hay Street for a number of blocks.

Graham Flats is built in the Post-War International Style, as demonstrated by the cubic massing, plain wall surfaces and the use of contrasting materials.

Graham Flats has a timber ground floor, but concrete suspended floors to all balconies, accessways, and the first and second floors. The external walls consist of face salmon pink coloured brickwork. The roof is of a low pitch and clad in corrugated metal. Additional materials are incorporated into the more prominent facades and include pre-cast concrete panels with an exposed aggregate, painted asbestos panels, ceramic wall tiles, Toodyay stone and in-situ concrete.

The plan shape of *Graham Flats* can be most easily described as comprising of two connecting blocks, a 'U' shaped block and a 'J' shaped block. The 'U' shaped block is at the west end, with the open part of the 'U' being a landscaped courtyard and facing west. The 'J' shaped block is to the east, with the open part of the 'J' facing south-west, and consists of a bitumen paved carpark with a small landscaped area. This complex plan shape reduces the apparent bulk of the place, maximises the effects of landscaping and facilitates orientation within the building.

Graham Flats has two main entrances, both addressing Hay Street. One entrance is located near the corner of Colin Street, and is approached from the east. This entrance is located in a parapet wall about four metres wide which articulates a 90 degree bend in the 'J' shaped block. The entrance consists of a porch with a concrete floor, four steps higher than the pavement, over which is a thin concrete roof supported on circular steel posts. A corner

²⁴ A search of the public records office revealed no plans of additions to *Graham Flats*. The Ministry of Housing only held a plan set of the original design which shows 70 units.

stairwell beyond has glazing arranged in a vertical strip on the east and also on the north facing return wall. The glazing is emphasised by the use of asbestos spandrel panels, painted green and red on the north side and red only on the east side. On the east facing parapet wall are vertical metal letters spelling 'GRAHAM'. These are arranged at first and second floor level between the glazing and the end wall. The verticality of this wall is subtly enhanced by an array of projecting bricks to the left or south of the strip glazing.

The second entrance off Hay Street is located to the west, and is an undercroft about ten metres wide which provides a direct link between Hay Street and the landscaped courtyard of the west facing 'U' shaped block. The entrance is framed on two sides by a concrete hood, about 100mm thick, which extends over the Hay Street side of the undercroft and returns vertically into the ground immediately west of it. The hood also continues east and terminates where the building steps back in plan. Metal letters spelling "GRAHAM", about 75mm high and spaced about 600mm apart, are located on the west side of the hood. The entrance and the undercroft immediately beyond are further articulated by the use of glazed wall tiles and also by the use of asbestos panels, painted red, to four sides of a plumbing duct.

Beyond the undercroft is a short walkway. The walkway consists of a 100mm thick concrete flat roof supported by three pairs of 100mm diameter painted steel posts. The walkway provides access from the undercroft to a lobby which is located about half-way along the base of the 'U' shaped block. The lobby provides access to a stairwell and also to common rooms which address Hay Street. A lift, installed in recent times, is located to the east of the lobby.

The internal finishes to the entrance lobbies and the common room area consist of linoleum tiles to the floors, the walls have a sand finished render, and the ceilings consist of acoustic tiles. The common room area is located directly to the east of the western entrance, and consists of a main room facing Hay Street, a small library to the south, and toilets to the west.

Graham Flats has a total of 75 apartments, comprising 20 on the ground floor, 25 on the first floor and 25 on the third floor. Documentary evidence refers to a total of 70 apartments, but there is, however, no evidence of an additional five apartments being added at a later date.

All of the apartments have one bedroom. A typical layout is as follows:

A flush panel entrance door is approached via a concrete floored accessway and leads directly onto a living and dining room with a small open small kitchen in a corner adjacent to the entrance. On the wall opposite the entrance door is a flush panel door with glazing to one side. The door provides access to a concrete floored balcony. Adjacent to the balcony is a bedroom, entered from a door in the lounge room adjacent to the kitchen.. A bathroom is located off the bedroom. On the wall shared with the adjacent kitchen is a toilet, basin and a bath.

Part of the balcony balustrade consists of metal balusters contained at top and bottom by metal rails. The remainder of the balustrade is precast concrete, comprising of a main panel and a short return panel. The panels have an exposed aggregate finish.

13.3 COMPARATIVE INFORMATION

Graham Flats is representative of the trend towards housing the disadvantaged in flats that was occurring in major cities of the western world in the post-war era. The first multi-storey public housing complex to be constructed in Western Australia was *Wandana Apartment Block*, Subiaco (1956). Other State Housing Commission flat complexes followed, including *Graham Flats*, West Perth (1958), Tingira, East Fremantle (1961; demolition licence issued in January 2000, but currently subject to an appeal), Myuna, North Fremantle (c. 1960; demolished 1999) and Brownlie Towers, Bentley (1970/1).²⁵

Information provided by Heritage Victoria indicates two apartment blocks which bear stylistic similarities to *Graham Flats*. These are Cairo Flats located at 98 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy and Caringal Flats located at 3 Tahara Road, Toorak, which are included on the Victorian Heritage Register.²⁶ Cairo Flats, a two storey block containing 28 bachelor flats, was built in 1936 and designed by architect Acheson Best Overend. Caringal Flats comprises one three storey block and one six storey block with a total of 18 flats, which was built in 1952 and designed by architect William Rivett.

Information from English Heritage indicates that three blocks of high rise flats are listed in the UK. They are Brooke House, Nos 1-84 Town Square, Basildon, Essex; Centre Point and Pond to Front, 101 and 103 New Oxford Street, Camden City of London, Greater London and Trellick Tower, Golbourne Road, Kensington, Kensington and Chelsea, Greater London.²⁷ Further research is required to identify whether these blocks comprise public or private housing and their dates of construction.

13.4 REFERENCES

No key references.

13.5 FURTHER RESEARCH

²⁵ See Sharp, R, 'A History of Public Housing in Western Australia', thesis, History Department, Murdoch University, 1993.

²⁶ Information extracted from Victorian Heritage Register On-Line, VHR Nos H579 and H1005.

²⁷ Information provided by Alyson Rogers to Rosemary Rosario, 24 February 2000.