



KEVIN J. CURTIN (1924-1996)

Kevin Joseph Curtin was born in Murrumburrah, NSW in 1924. His family moved to Queanbeyan, where Kevin and his twin brother Leo Patrick attended St Gregory's Primary School, then to Ainslie in 1940. ¹ Kevin completed his education at Canberra High School, and became a clerk in the Public Service, as did Patrick. On turning 18 they enlisted in the RAAF in 1943 and served as navigators of Lancaster bombers over Germany. Patrick had vowed to pursue a career in architecture after the War, but was killed in action in 1945. Kevin returned to Australia determined to fulfil his brother's ambition. ² He became an Associate of the RAI in 1951, having completed a non-diploma course in architecture at Sydney Technical College, ³ and established the Curtin and Cameron practice in Sydney 1953. He was so well regarded in the profession that he was a member of the jury for the Sulman Medal in 1954 and a Fellow in 1970. ⁴

Curtin's affiliation with the Catholic Church eventually led to commissions for more than 50 churches and over 200 schools. For these, he was awarded a Papal Medal. ⁵ He designed some remarkable churches, particularly St Bernard's, Botany (1954) said to be Australia's first church with a parabolic roof, reminiscent of the contemporary thin shell structures of the Mexican architect Felix Candela. ⁶ Other notable churches are St Monica's, North Parramatta (1960) with a nine-bay A-frame roof ⁷ and Marist Brothers Chapel, Kogarah (1961), a two-storey circular chapel and assembly hall with a radiating pre-cast concrete folded-plate roof. ⁸ By this time his practice was Kevin J. Curtin & Partners. He completed major hotels for the Federal Hotels chain, as well as the Wrest Point Convention Centre in Hobart and casinos in Darwin, Alice Springs and Launceston. His Civic developments in NSW included Broken Hill, Dubbo and Bankstown. ⁹

When the Dominican Order in Australia resolved in 1960 to set up its headquarters in the Canberra suburb of Watson, the Irish architect and Dominican Father Bonaventure Leahy designed a complex with a Dominican Sisters Convent and teachers training college and a Dominican priests' house of theology. ¹⁰ The concept included a parish church and a primary school. Kevin Curtin was engaged to collaborate with Father Leahy and building began in 1961. ¹¹ Kevin Curtin and Partners were the lighting and heating consultants for the house of theology. ¹² The convent and college opened in 1963, the Dominican Rosary School in 1964 ¹³ and the house of theology in 1966. ¹⁴

Curtin designed the Queanbeyan Leagues Club in 1963. This and other projects, such as Queanbeyan R.S.L. Club and the Queanbeyan Bowling Club prompted him to open a Canberra branch of his Sydney-based practice in 1964. ¹⁵ In that year Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic churches and a presbytery were designed for Jindabyne in the New South Wales Snowy Mountains. ¹⁶ St Columbkille's Catholic Church opened in 1966. ¹⁷ At the Australian National University, Curtin designed the John XXIII College and the Chapel of St John the Evangelist, the first chapel on the campus. They opened in 1969, the same year as Curtin's Yowani Country Club in Lyneham. Other clubs designed by Curtin include Canberra Southern Cross Club (1972) Canberra Royals Club (1975) and Queanbeyan Leagues Club Redevelopment (1975). ¹⁸ His Macquarie Hotel was completed in Macquarie in 1970. Canberra schools designed by Curtin include Canberra Catholic Girls High School, now Merici College, Braddon (1959), St. John Vianney's Primary School, Warramanga (1971), St Matthew's Catholic Primary School, Page (1971), St Francis Xavier Catholic High School, Florey, (1976) and Padua Catholic High School, Wanniaassa (1978). ¹⁹

Perhaps Curtin's greatest legacies to Canberra are two remarkable churches, based on the Vatican Council II's recognition of the "centralised sanctuary". St Joseph's Catholic Church, O'Connor (1973) is a good example of the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style, with a striking external form, which, thanks to its open site, can be appreciated on all sides. The dominant bronze-coloured steel-deck roof has four complex kite-shaped elements sloping from a central pyramidal tower over the generally circular church, which is walled in uncoursed bluestone. Internally, natural light flows in through dazzlingly coloured glass; down from the central skylight and via wall panels each side of the spot-lit simple altar.

Holy Trinity Catholic Church (1975) in Curtin, designed in association with Ernest Munns, is another good example of the style, this time with brick walls and a terra-cotta tiled roof. The form is a triangular pyramid, with substantial smaller pyramids attached on each side, but the composition, on a less open site, is not as successful externally as that of St Joseph's. The spatial quality of the interior, where the projecting triangular bays are seen to advantage, is quite unusual. A central skylight floods the interior with daylight.

A notable and prominent example of Curtin's architecture in Canberra is the former ACT TAB, now TransACT, brick office tower on Northbourne Avenue, Dickson (1975-78).²⁰

In July 1977 the architectural and engineering practice of Kevin J. Curtin and Partners Pty Ltd in Canberra was purchased by Ernest Munns and Robert Sly to become Munns, Sly and Associates Pty Ltd.²¹ Sly was a newcomer, but Ernest Munns had managed Curtin's Canberra office for some time. Curtin's final project before retiring was the St Mary's Cathedral School, Cardinal and Priests' residence in Sydney (1992). He died in 1996, aged 71. His career had spanned four decades and included the design of an extraordinary range of buildings; notably church, civic, schools and hospitality architecture.²²



Top row: St Joseph's Catholic Church, O'Conner. Photos by Ken Charlton.

Bottom row: Chapel of St John the Evangelist, ANU, photo by Ken Charlton; Interior and exterior of St Bernard's Catholic Church, Botany. Photos by Roy Lumby in *The Modern Movement in New South Wales*.

The photo of Kevin J. Curtin was in the obituary by John Barnard.

- ¹ Property and Tenancy Register for 66 Campbell Street, Ainslie, ACT Archives.
- ² John Barnard, Obituary of Kevin Joseph Curtin, 1996 in <http://architectureau.com/articles/departures/> and War Records of Kevin Joseph Curtin and Leo Patrick Curtin, NAA barcodes 5374039 and 5373836.
- ³ The Sydney Morning Herald, *Passes in Technical Education Exams*, Friday 4 January 1952, p 6.
- ⁴ SMH, *Sulman Medal won by Vic. Architect*, Tuesday 19 August 1954, p 5. and RAIA 1990 Directory.
- ⁵ Barnard, op cit.
- ⁶ Hercon Consulting, *The Modern Movement in New South Wales*, for Heritage Council of NSW, 2013 p 75 and The Sydney Morning Herald, *Parabolic Design*, Tuesday 29 June 1954, p 12.
- ⁷ University of Melbourne Faculty of Architecture, *Cross-Section*, No.102, April 1961.
- ⁸ NLA Photographic image No. A1200:L40143
- ⁹ Barnard, op cit.
- ¹⁰ The Canberra Times, *New Teachers' College Opened*, 25 March 25 1963, p1 and *Model of Dominican Centre* March 28. 1963.
- ¹¹ Catholic Voice, March 2013.
- ¹² The Canberra Times, 9 February 1966, p 20
- ¹³ J.R. Connor, *A Guide to Canberra Buildings*, A&R / RAIA, 1970.
- ¹⁴ http://www.acu.edu.au/staff/campuses/canberra/campus_history
- ¹⁵ The Canberra Times, 1 November 1963, p 32 and Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
- ¹⁶ The Canberra Times, 24 April 1963, p 26
- ¹⁷ <http://www.monaropioneers.com/jindabyne/st.colomkillies.htm>
- ¹⁸ Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
- ¹⁹ The Canberra Times, 18 November 1974, p 3 and Robert Sly, pers. comm. to Ken Charlton, April 2016
- ²⁰ The Canberra Times, 30 August 1975, p 3, and 26 June 1978, p 18
- ²¹ The Canberra Times, 9 July, 1977, p 24
- ²² Barnard, op cit.