

Australian Institute of Architects ACT Chapter  
**Register of Significant Architecture**

**RSA No:** R 118

**Name of Place:** Norwood Park Crematorium

**Other/Former Names:**

**Address/Location:** 65 Sandford Street, Mitchell ACT 2911

Block 1 Section 54 of Mitchell

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	None
Date of Listing:	1/12/2014	Level of Significance:	Territory
Citation Revision No:		Category:	Funerary
Citation Revision Date:		Style:	Post-War International

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Date of Design:	1965	Designer:	Rosman, Hastings and Sorel
Construction	1965-6	Client/Owner/Lessee:	Canberra Crematorium Ltd
		Builder:	S.D.C. Kennedy & Bird Pty Ltd

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**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:**

The Norwood Park Crematorium, completed in 1966, is the only building of its type in Canberra, and demonstrates a high degree of technical and creative achievement by successfully providing a facility for funeral services, as well as the purely industrial operation of cremation, in an appropriately-landscaped garden setting. It is also rare for being a comparatively intact Post-War International style building of considerable architectural significance. The crematorium's chapel has an exceptionally fine level of application of the sleek, transparent architecture pioneered by European modernists. The interior achieves a sense of lightness and a strong relationship with the exterior, due to the fully glazed walls and the roof which appears to hover over the building. The space around the chapel is well defined by solid blade walls, and water is used to good effect in the courtyards.

The building is a notable example of the Post-War International style of architecture, although it was completed at the end of its style period. It demonstrates the style's broad characteristics of sleek, glossy, prismatic forms with uninterrupted surfaces, plus precision, sharpness and transparency. It has landscaping as the only decorative foil, which is typical of the style. It was awarded the Canberra Medallion, for "the best designed structure other than a house", in 1968 by the ACT Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and in 1997 it was awarded a 25-Year Award, for sustained architectural excellence.

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**Description**

The Norwood Park Crematorium provides a facility to first celebrate the lives of the deceased in a chapel for funeral services that are appropriate for all creeds, then discretely cremate their remains. Their ashes can be placed in niches in columbarium walls or behind plaques in the extensive memorial gardens, where the deceased can be remembered. It is sited to face north on a knoll, and prominence is given to the chapel over the more industrial function of the crematorium.

The gardens provide an appropriate landscape setting for the crematorium, with a generally informal layout, quite open with informal garden beds, lawn and some mature eucalypts to the north of the chapel, where mourners approach from the car park, and more thickly treed to the south. The trees form a backdrop to the chapel when viewed from the front and helps to screen the rear entrance to the crematorium service yard. The chapel's western courtyard has a high brick wall and a small waterfall falling into a long reflection pool. It is partly enclosed by a high hedge. The shorter eastern courtyard has a similar waterfall and pool. Its brick wall separates it from the cremation wing. Both courtyards have some paving, lawn and ground cover beds with palms and ferns on the south sides of brick walls. The landscape is the only decorative foil to the building.

The chapel's nave, square in plan form, can seat 100 mourners. It is entered from a porte-cochere through embossed copper sliding doors via a lobby, separated from the nave by a glazed wall. This allows overflow standing room in the lobby for some mourners, when the nave is full, to experience the service. There are courtyards on each side of the nave, to provide a pleasant outlook and accommodate greater numbers of mourners, either seated or standing, at larger funerals when the wide sliding doors are opened. A vestry and a more recent screened utility area are located beside the lobby. A raised dais in the chapel accommodates a marble-faced descending catafalque, allowing coffins to be lowered into the cremation area underneath the dais. This lower floor of the crematorium, which extends to the south and east, has two squat chimneys and a narrow service yard, all screened from the gardens by brick columbarium walls. The Centenary Room, completed in 2000 to the east of the courtyard, is separated from it by a off-white rendered-brick screen wall.

The chapel has a flat steel-deck roof on a steel frame, visible only as two thin square columns where the roof overhangs to form an entrance porte-cochere. The deep fascias are lined with timber boarding, as are the soffits and ceilings, which form a continuous under surface. The porte-cochere has a skylight adjacent to the front door. The face-brick front wall, little more than door height, extends considerably as a blade wall to screen the courtyards and is separated from the roof by frameless glazing. The effect is to give the building a horizontal emphasis, with the roof appearing to float with little support. The east and west walls of the nave are fully glazed, providing the interior with a sense of lightness and a strong relationship with the exterior, softened by light curtains. They are set back from the edge of the roof to achieve sun-protecting overhangs. The Centenary Room has a flat roof with a large skylight and horizontally-proportioned grey rendered walls, with an overall recessive character in order to be subservient to the original building.

In her report when the building was awarded a 25-Year Award in 1997, the architect and jury panel member Caroline Roberts wrote "The form of the building exhibits the influence of the European Modernist period of the 1920s and 1930s and the development of International Modernism in the post-war period which, particularly in Melbourne, influenced architectural design in Australia. The influence of the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe, with minimalist detailing, space being defined by solid blade walls extended by the juxtaposition of glazing, is reflected in both the plan and elevational treatment of the crematorium building."<sup>i</sup> The reference to the Barcelona Pavilion is pertinent. Mies wanted the pavilion to become "an ideal zone of tranquillity..."<sup>ii</sup> so it shares that function with the crematorium chapel. Both buildings have roofs which appears to be hovering over fully glazed walls, and contrasting long blade walls forming courtyards with pools. Although the architect of the crematorium chapel may have used the pavilion as an inspiration, it is an original design for a particular purpose.

The Norwood Park Crematorium is a notable example of the Post-War International style of architecture, although it was completed in 1966, at the end of its style period. It demonstrates the style's broad characteristics of sleek, glossy, prismatic forms with uninterrupted surfaces, plus precision, sharpness and transparency. It has landscaping as the only decorative foil, which is typical of the style. The building has the four indicators peculiar to the style: cubiform overall shape; an expressed structural frame and large sheets of glass. Other indicators it possesses are external sun-control devices, plain smooth wall surfaces and cantilevers. The Late Twentieth-Century International style, after 1960, was characterised by the increasing use of curvilinear forms and reinforced concrete.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Condition**

The crematorium building has high integrity, but the oregon roof fascias no longer have their original dark-stained finish, which they had as recently as 2003. A minor alteration before 1997 was the creation of the screened utility area within the lobby. The major addition was the adjacent Centenary Room of 2000. Memorial niches, originally in the eastern courtyard, were removed before 1997. A dark grey sail roof has been introduced to partly shade the eastern courtyard, and a wide curved concrete path has been laid, leading from the nave to the Centenary Room. Most of the western courtyard has been paved.

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### **Background/History**

By 1963, due to the growth of Canberra, there was a great demand for a crematorium. The Department of the Interior identified a 9 1/2 acre (3.85 Ha) site, then described as block 244 in the District of Gungahlin, accessible from the Barton Highway, for such a facility. The Department advertised for applicants to lease the site, with a term of 99 years, for the purpose of a crematorium, including a chapel and a memorial garden.<sup>iv</sup> In April 1964 it was announced that Canberra Crematorium Ltd, incorporated in Canberra, had been granted the lease, which required the erection of approved buildings costing not less than £60,000, parking facilities for at least 60 cars, screen planting and landscaping. One of the company's five shareholders, who became directors, was the Melbourne architect Peter Sorel.<sup>v</sup> Applicants for the lease had

not been required to submit plans for the proposed buildings and landscape, but the successful applicant was required to do so, and the company engaged Sorel's practice, Rosman, Hastings and Sorel, for the project.

The Norwood Park Crematorium and its gardens was the result of a collaboration, with Peter Sorel managing the project, checking the design, specifications and details and reporting to the client; Gregory Rosman, having design expertise and George Hastings, being a planner, contributed to the project. They were assisted in the initial stage of the project by Mervyn Hayman-Danker, a qualified architect employed as an architectural design draftsman. The consulting structural engineer was Frank Dixon and the forester who designed the memorial gardens was Ray Margules.<sup>vi</sup> In July 1965 the Chairman of Canberra Crematorium Ltd, Sir Patrick McGovern, announced that roadwork and landscaping of the site was well underway and tenders for building work would soon be called.<sup>vii</sup>

Norwood Park Crematorium was opened on 11 July 1966, having been constructed by S.D.C. Kennedy & Bird Pty Ltd in less than twelve months at a cost of \$200,000.<sup>viii</sup> In March 1968 Canberra Crematorium Ltd reported that "Much effort has gone into the improvement and beautification of the memorial gardens which are now becoming firmly established and recognised as a venue for visits by local residents as well as tourists visiting the capital".<sup>ix</sup> For the 1968 RAlA ACT Chapter architecture awards, the C.S. Daley Award for a residential building was initiated and the Canberra Medallion, previously awarded for any category of building, was restricted to buildings other than houses. The Norwood Park Crematorium was awarded the Canberra Medallion. 25 buildings had been entered, including the National Library, the Anzac Memorial Chapel of St Paul at the RMC Duntroon and the Prudential Assurance building. The judges of the award were Sir Osborn McCutcheon, of Melbourne, Sidney Smith, of Sydney, both architects, and Hope Hewitt, of Canberra, a lecturer in English at the Australian National University.<sup>x</sup> Announcing the decision, Sir Osborn McCutcheon said the winning entry was "on a superb site with a magnificent outlook and made a very direct and simple statement of the elements of a crematorium. The flanking walls, the pools, and the courtyards have been most sensitively used to create an atmosphere suitable to this building". The crematorium received the first of the bronze medallions designed in 1968 by Peter Swalling.<sup>xi</sup> In 1995 the RAlA (ACT) began annual 25-Year Awards for sustained architectural excellence and in 1997 the crematorium received one of that year's awards.<sup>xii</sup> A medallion recording the award has been mounted beside the crematorium's 1968 medallion. A new facility adjacent to the chapel, the Centenary Room, was completed in 2000.<sup>xiii</sup> It provides a venue for refreshments for those attending funerals, and its designers were careful not to adversely affect the architectural qualities of the crematorium.

Peter Anne Sorel (1925-2009) was the partner in the Rosman, Hastings and Sorel architectural practice in charge of the Norwood Park Crematorium project. He was born in Paris, and when living in St Kilda in 1944 enlisted an Ordinary Seaman in the RAN.<sup>xiv</sup> After being demobbed in 1946 he continued his secondary education at Wesley College<sup>xv</sup> and completed an architecture degree at the University of Melbourne in 1954. He became an Associate of the RAlA in 1955 and by 1963 the Rosman, Hastings and Sorel practice had been established, based at South Melbourne.<sup>xvi</sup> Peter Sorel was elevated to Fellow of the RAlA in 1970 and to Life Fellow in 1981. With the practice having apparently ceased by 1988, he was living in New Farm, Queensland.<sup>xvii</sup> He returned to Brighton, Victoria, moved into the Anzac Hostel, died and was cremated in 2009.<sup>xviii</sup>

Gregory Kenneth Rosman (1924-) also enlisted in the RAN, and served from 1942 to 1946.<sup>xix</sup> He then completed his education, gaining a degree in architecture at the University of Melbourne and became an Associate of the RAlA in 1956.<sup>xx</sup> He was elevated to FRAIA in 1970. In 1988 his address was in Commercial Road, Melbourne.<sup>xxi</sup>

George Hastings gained a degree in architecture at the University of Melbourne and became an Associate of the RAlA in 1958. He completed a Diploma in Town and Country Planning and became a Member of the Australian Planning Institute.<sup>xxii</sup> He was elevated to FRAIA in 1970. In 1988 his address was in Glen Iris.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Mervyn Hayman-Danker (1940-) completed a diploma in architecture from RMIT in 1963. He worked for Rosman, Hastings and Sorel as an architectural design draftsman in 1963-5, then transferred to Yuncken Freeman Architects in 1965, where he was a senior job captain, until 1978. He became an Associate of the RAlA in 1975. A Postgraduate Diploma in Urban Systems from Swinburne University, completed in 1978, was followed by a Master of Planning and Design degree in urban design from the University of Melbourne. He was elevated to FRAIA in 1985.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The work of the Rosman, Hastings and Sorel practice in the 1960s included residential, commercial, industrial, educational and ecclesiastical projects.<sup>xxv</sup> In 1964 the firm began the first major restoration of St

Johns C of E, Heidelberg (1849).<sup>xxvi</sup> A major project in the 1970s was a redevelopment, which did not proceed, at Emerald Hill, a precinct of 19th century buildings centred on South Melbourne Town Hall.<sup>xxvii</sup> The practice had apparently ceased by 1988, as Sorel was in Queensland, Rosman was in Melbourne and Hastings was in Glen Iris.

The consulting structural engineer for the Norwood Park Crematorium building was Frank Dixon (1923-2013).<sup>xxviii</sup> He completed an engineering degree in 1946 and while staff engineer at Yuncken, Freeman Brothers Griffiths & Simpson completed an architecture degree in 1949. Because of his dual qualifications, he was for four decades the preferred structural consultant to many Melbourne architects, in particular Yuncken Freeman Ltd, one of Australia's most significant and influential post-war architectural practices.<sup>xxix</sup>

Ray Margules (1925-2013) BSc (Forestry) Sydney, Dip. Forestry (ANU) (1950), M LA (UCLA) (1967) was the forester who designed the memorial gardens.<sup>xxx</sup> He had worked for ACT Parks and Gardens since 1951 and was awarded a scholarship for post-graduate study at the UCLA in 1965. He then practised as a consultant landscape architect from 1967 to 1985.<sup>xxxi</sup>

### Comparable Buildings in Canberra

The three most comparable Canberra buildings are the Russell Canteen<sup>xxxii</sup> (1965, architects Buchan Laird and Buchan), the Lobby Restaurant, King George Terrace, Parkes<sup>xxxiii</sup> (1968, architects O'Mahony, Neville and Morgan) and the West Portal Cafeteria, Constitution Avenue, Parkes<sup>xxxiv</sup> (1967, architects O'Mahony, Neville and Morgan). Each is of human scale and has a single storey, a square plan, full-height glazing on three sides, a clearly-expressed horizontal roof plane with wide eaves and a timber-boarded ceiling. As such, they have the same sleek, glossy, prismatic forms (characteristic of the Post-War International style) and same precision, sharpness and transparency as the crematorium chapel. They differ from the crematorium chapel in having lantern roofs with clerestorey lighting. Most Canberra churches of the 1960s have a function comparable to the crematorium chapel as a venue for services, but are in the Late Twentieth-Century Ecclesiastical style, characterised by an emphasis on verticality. The Church of Christ, Lyons<sup>xxxv</sup> (1967, architect Dirk Bolt) and Canberra Mosque, Yarralumla<sup>xxxvi</sup> (1961, architect Gerd and Renate Block) are more unusual in having cubiform overall shapes characteristic of the Late Twentieth-Century International style and that is their main similarity to the crematorium chapel.

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### ANALYSIS AGAINST THE HERCON CRITERIA ADOPTED IN THE ACT IN SEPTEMBER 2014:

a. *Importance in the course or pattern of the ACT's cultural or natural history*

Although it has a place in the history of the development of Canberra, Norwood Park Crematorium does not meet this criterion.

b. *Has uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the ACT's cultural or natural history*

The Norwood Park Crematorium is unique in Canberra as its only crematorium. It is also rare for being a comparatively intact Post-War International style building of considerable architectural significance.

d. *Importance in demonstrates the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or objects*

The Norwood Park Crematorium is a notable example of the Post-War International style of architecture, although it was completed at the end of its style period. It demonstrates the style's broad characteristics of sleek, glossy, prismatic forms with uninterrupted surfaces, plus precision, sharpness and transparency. It has landscaping as the only decorative foil, which is typical of the style. The building has the four indicators peculiar to the style: cubiform overall shape; an expressed structural frame and large sheets of glass. Other indicators it possesses are wide eaves as external sun-control devices, plain smooth wall surfaces and cantilevers.

f. *Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement for a particular period*

The Norwood Park Crematorium demonstrates a high degree of technical and creative achievement for the 1960s by successfully providing a facility for funeral services, as well as the purely industrial operation of cremation, in an appropriately-landscaped garden setting. The crematorium's chapel has an exceptionally fine level of application of the sleek, transparent architecture pioneered by European modernists. The interior achieves a sense of lightness and a strong relationship with the exterior, due to the fully glazed walls and the

roof which appears to hover over the building. The space around the chapel is well defined by solid blade walls, and water is used to good effect in the courtyards.

## END NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> *The Sunday Times (Canberra Times)*, 6 July 1997
  - <sup>ii</sup> Mies van der Rohe Barcelona Pavilion, from Wikipedia.
  - <sup>iii</sup> Apperly et al, *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, A & R, 1989
  - <sup>iv</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 3 January 1964 p 4
  - <sup>v</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 11 April 1964 p 6
  - <sup>vi</sup> Mervyn Hayman-Danker FRAIA profile on LinkedIn and his pers, comm. to Ken Charlton
  - <sup>vii</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 7 July 1965 p 4
  - <sup>viii</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 11 July 1966 p 8
  - <sup>ix</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 26 March 1968 p 8
  - <sup>x</sup> *The Canberra Times*, 1 November 1968 p 1
  - <sup>xi</sup> Roger Pegrum, "Canberra's Golden Chapter: Our First fifty Years" in *2013 ACT Architecture Awards* booklet, AIA ACT Chapter.
  - <sup>xii</sup> *The Sunday Times (Canberra Times)*, 6 July 1997
  - <sup>xiii</sup> From the plaque on the building.
  - <sup>xiv</sup> NAA Series A6770, Sorel, Peter Anne. Service Number PM7247
  - <sup>xv</sup> *The Argus*, 16 April 1948
  - <sup>xvi</sup> RAA Year Book 1968-69 *Architecture in Australia* Nov 1968
  - <sup>xvii</sup> The RAA Membership Directory, 1988
  - <sup>xviii</sup> Obituary, John Allison/Monkhouse Funeral Directors, Brighton, Victoria, 2009
  - <sup>xix</sup> NAA Series A6769, Rosman, Gregory Kenneth Service number PM4597
  - <sup>xx</sup> RAA Year Book 1968-69 *Architecture in Australia* Nov 1968
  - <sup>xxi</sup> The RAA Membership Directory, 1988
  - <sup>xxii</sup> RAA Year Book 1968-69 *Architecture in Australia* Nov 1968
  - <sup>xxiii</sup> The RAA Membership Directory, 1988
  - <sup>xxiv</sup> Mervyn Hayman-Danker FRAIA profile on LinkedIn
  - <sup>xxv</sup> Mervyn Hayman-Danker FRAIA profile on LinkedIn
  - <sup>xxvi</sup> *The Age*, 13 March 1964
  - <sup>xxvii</sup> nla.gov.au/anbd.bib-an6131578 Proposal for redevelopment at Emerald Hill, 1970-1979
  - <sup>xxviii</sup> Mervyn Hayman-Danker pers. comm. to Ken Charlton
  - <sup>xxix</sup> [http://www.builtheritage.com.au/dua\\_dixon.html](http://www.builtheritage.com.au/dua_dixon.html)
  - <sup>xxx</sup> Mervyn Hayman-Danker pers. comm. to Ken Charlton
  - <sup>xxxi</sup> Obituary of Ray Margules, *The Forester*, A Publication of the Institute of Foresters Australia, Feb 2014
- p19
- <sup>xxxii</sup> RNEdb 102807
  - <sup>xxxiii</sup> RNEdb 102812
  - <sup>xxxiv</sup> Duncan Marshall, *Conservation Management Plan for the West Portal Cafeteria*, NCA, 2005
  - <sup>xxxv</sup> Graeme Trickett and Ken Charlton, *Rest - The contribution of Dirk Bolt to Canberra's Architecture and Planning*, RAA (ACT) 2013
  - <sup>xxxvi</sup> J.R. Conner, *A Guide to Canberra Buildings*, A & R, RAA, 1970 p 43