

# Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

**RSTCA No:** R055I

**Name of Place:** Changi Chapel

**Other/Former Names:**

**Address/Location:** Harrison Road DUNTROON ACT 2600

Block Section of

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Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	RNE
Date of Listing:		Level of Significance:	National
Citation Revision No:	3	Category:	Religious
Citation Revision Date:	November 03	Style:	Art Deco

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Date of Design:	1944	Designer:	Hamish Cameron-Smith
Construction Period:	1944	Client/Owner/Lessee:	RMC
Date of Additions:	1987-88	Builder:	RMC Engineers

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## Statement of Significance

The Changi Chapel is significant for a range of symbolic associations. It has a special association with the former prisoners of Changi Camp, a World War 2 prisoner-of-war camp in Singapore, where as the Catholic Chapel it was originally built in 1944 by prisoners held by the Japanese military forces. It reflects the enduring faith of prisoners subject to adversity. The chapel has a more general symbolic value for all Australian former prisoners of war as the National Memorial to Prisoners of War, particularly those from World War 2.

The chapel is also a rare surviving structure built by Allied prisoners of war from World War 2. A feature of the simple but refined chapel, which reflects the adverse circumstances of its construction, is the use of scrounged building materials.

## Description

The reconstructed Art Deco style chapel is an open structure, 3.6m by 4.8m, constructed mainly from timber, Masonite and galvanised iron, which forms a sanctuary. Its pitched roof of reddish terracotta tiles is raised clear of the walls. The roof is supported by struts onto four large wooden posts, one at each corner.

The altar wall at the back of the chapel is sheeted in Masonite, symmetrical and stepped in the Art Deco manner and painted white with a green trim. The wooden altar is centrally placed, and directly above it is a rectangle of green galvanised iron with a white cross superimposed on it. The sides of the structure are comprised partially of a wall and partially of a green altar rail, while the front of the chapel is a green altar rail only with a small gate at the centre. There is a large light fitting fixed to the centre of the roof which lights the altar. The chapel has been reconstructed on a concrete slab 6m by 7.8m, with concrete tubs, each with rosemary growing in it, at each corner of the front.

The landscaping of the site is intended to symbolise the original Changi site. It is built in a grassy parkland, with the axis of the chapel centred on existing gum trees. Several seats forming a nave are located in the grassed area in front of the chapel similar to an amphitheatre, as was the seating at Changi.

## Condition and Integrity

The chapel is in good condition and is largely intact. As part of the reconstruction process some new materials, such as timber posts and roof members, and roof tiles, were used to replace missing materials. <sup>2</sup>

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## Background/History

Following the entry of Japan into World War 2, its military forces conducted a series of campaigns to gain control over Asia and the Pacific. A key target was Singapore which was the focus of the British presence in the region, including its military forces. Singapore Island was captured by Japanese forces on 15 February 1942. The fall of Singapore and a series of other campaigns by the Japanese forces resulted in a large number of Allied service personnel, including Australians, being taken prisoner. The surrender of Allied forces on Singapore included about 15,000 Australians. This was by far the largest number of Australians captured in the region during the war. In order to accommodate these and other prisoners, the Changi Gaol was established on 17 February 1942 as the Prisoner-of-War Headquarters for Singapore. Changi was up to that time a British army barracks.

Changi remained a prisoner-of-war camp until the end of the war. However, the number of Australians housed there varied because the Japanese used the prisoners as a work force for projects away from Singapore. Notwithstanding this fluctuation in numbers, Changi remained the largest Australian prisoner-of-war camp in the region. Prisoners of war from the 8th Division AIF were interned in the Changi Gaol Camp from 1943 onwards, and within weeks of their arrival had determined to build a Catholic Chapel. Originally a simple post and beam structure with a frond floor was erected under the guidance of Lieutenants Hamish Cameron-Smith and Hugh Simon-Thwaites. A more elaborate Chapel was designed by Cameron-Smith who was an architect in civilian life. The Chapel evolved over an extended period in 1944 and utilised found materials. It was used as a place of worship until the end of the war.

In October 1945 the War Graves Unit, including Corporal Max Lee, spent a few days by chance in the Changi Camp, en route to Sumatra. Corporal Lee made a request to the British to save the chapel, which was one of the few structures that had not been destroyed by fire. Permission was granted and after extensive photographs were taken and measured drawings and sketches were made by Lee, the Chapel was dismantled by a working party of surrendered Japanese personnel. It was crated to Australia in 1947, with the intention that the Chapel be reconstructed as a fitting memorial for "prisoners of war who had little recognition for the extreme adversity under which many had lived and died" (attributed to Lee).

The crates were stored in the Australian War Memorial where they remained for 40 years. The chapel was finally offered to the Australian Defence Force Academy and in 1987 reconstruction work commenced. The work was undertaken by the Royal Australian Engineer Corps. Following an unsuccessful application for Bicentennial funding, the Army launched a nation-wide public appeal for funds. In consultation with the Australian Heritage Commission, a site at Duntroon was chosen in the centre of small parkland close to the ANZAC Memorial Chapel.

The items inside the crates were marked with alphabetic and numerical codes enabling accurate reconstruction. Included were: the cross from the roof and roof tiles, panels from above the altar and the altar, most of the floor tiles, two roof beams and struts, timber framing from the side walls, a few pieces of timber trim, corrugated iron skirting, electrical switchboard, and electrical light fittings. Missing were two front posts and the remainder of the roof frame. Replacement timbers were provided. Some of the roof tiles were broken. Originally the tiles were from the Malabar tile works at Feroke in India, and identical replacement tiles were obtained from Saint Mary's Church at Rose Hill, Sydney. There was no attempt to replace missing floor tiles. Although photographs and sketches from 1945-46 indicate the chapel was not wired, an electrical switchboard and wiring were found in a crate and this was installed. Paint samples were matched at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education, and the chapel was painted in its original colours.

The chapel was dedicated as a National Memorial to all Australian prisoners of war on 15 August 1988, the anniversary of the end of the war. The service was attended by Max Lee and many of the Changi survivors and their relatives. Both Hugh Simon-Thwaites, who had become a Catholic

priest in England, and the architect Hamish Cameron-Smith, living in Zambia, were traced though too late to enable them to attend the dedication ceremony. They were subsequently brought to Australia in May 1990 when Father Simon-Thwaites celebrated mass in the Chapel. 2

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### **Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991**

*(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time*

*(ii) a place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group*

*(iii) a place which demonstrates a distinctive way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger or being lost, or is of exceptional interest*

*(iv) a place which is highly valued by the community or a cultural group for reasons of strong or special religious, spiritual, cultural, educational or social associations*

*(v) a place which is the only known or only comparatively intact example of its type*

*(vi) a place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principal characteristics of that class*

*(vii) a place which has strong or special associations with person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history*

*(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site*

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### **References**

1. Peter Freeman and Associates, Conservation Plan, Re-Construction of Changi Chapel as a National POW Memorial, RMC Duntroon, Canberra, 1987.
  2. Australian Heritage Commission, *Changi Chapel Place Details 18374*, Register of the National Estate, 2003.
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### **Other Information Sources**