

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R129

Name of Place: McKeown House

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: 109 Irvine Street WATSON
Block 30 Section 47 of Watson

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	2010	Level of Significance:	National
Citation Revision No:	0	Category:	Residential
Citation Revision Date:		Style:	Late Twentieth-Century Organic

Date of Design: 1963 Designer: Enrico Taglietti

Construction Period: 1963 - 1965 Client/Owner/Lessee: William & Robin McKeown

Date of Addition: Design 1993 Construction 1995 Builder: Georg Teliczan (1965)

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The 1965 McKeown house at 109 Irvine Street, Watson is an exceptional creative achievement by Enrico Taglietti, having a sculptural form based on his new geometry for architecture, to create a work of art. The aesthetic quality of the house is remarkable, due to the elegant splayed angles of the white walls and jewel-like corner windows, under a sheltering flat roof with long horizontal timber fascias. The house is of architectural significance as a good example of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style (1960-), as interpreted by Taglietti, which displays key indicators of the style – free asymmetrical massing, complex angular geometry complementing nature and clearly expressed timber structure. The splayed corner windows and the roof design, with rainwater falling to a central gutter and spilling out as a garden feature, were quite innovative.

The high aesthetic quality of the 1995 addition matches that of the 1965 house. It has vertical massing which contrasts with the horizontal proportions of the earlier house, and the two buildings combine well visually. The 1995 addition is significant as a compact example of a more mature Taglietti design, in which the exterior massing reflects the internal arrangement of space to flow vertically as well as horizontally. The difficult problem of designing this unusual building was solved most successfully. The addition is of architectural significance as a good example of Taglietti's interpretation of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style, which displays key indicators of the style – free asymmetrical massing, complex angular geometry complementing nature.

The 1965 house and its 1995 addition are important for their strong associations with Enrico Taglietti, who played a significant role in Canberra's cultural history as one of the most important architects to practice in the city. They are of exceptional interest for the opportunity they presents to demonstrate how his domestic architecture developed over thirty years.

DESCRIPTION

The 1965 single-storied house was planned to have three bedrooms by having a garage able to be converted into the third bedroom. The gentle slope across the width of the site allowed a level floor. The plan has two staggered squares, one open-planned for living (lounge, kitchen and dining spaces) and the other for sleeping (two bedrooms, bathroom, laundry and the garage/third bedroom). The walls are white-painted rendered brickwork and the flat roof, with wide eaves all around, has a galvanised-iron deck and splayed fascias of stained timber boarding, from the underside of which timber beams project beyond the fascias. The ceiling is compressed straw.

The walls are elegantly tapered to give the McKeown house a sculptural form. The blank wall to the street is extended as a sloping garden wall to screen the approach to the front door and garage. Two other sloping garden walls project into the back garden. The two front corners of the house have splayed corner windows with planting boxes and sloped glazing, lighting the dining space and the second bedroom. The rear walls have large glazed openings to the master bedroom and the open-plan living/kitchen/dining room allowing the back gardens to be appreciated from the interior. The prospect from the interior to the front garden and the street is more subtle, reflecting the need for privacy. The roof has a wide central concrete gutter between the staggered squares, from which rainwater spills at the front into a small pool. This and a concrete oil tank above the pool contribute to the sculptural form of the house. A prefabricated steel carport was added in 1994 over the driveway on the western side of the house and timber posts have been added to provide extra support for some projecting roof beams. The house is intact and has high integrity.

The 1995 addition is situated in the centre of the garden behind the 1965 house. It is self-contained, but linked to the earlier house by an enclosed passage. The line of the passage is an extension of the central passage of the 1965 house, which is directly underneath the wide concrete roof gutter. Taglietti's two-storey design contrasts markedly with his adjacent horizontally-proportioned, single-level house. While the walls of both are white-painted rendered brickwork, the emphasis is on vertical massing in the addition. The stained finish of the timber-boarded balcony and other external woodwork adds warmth which complements the whiteness of the exterior. The white corrugated-steel gabled roof is steeply pitched, culminating in a tower-like element above the western gable.

The addition is sited well, with the lush quality of the surrounding garden retained and intimate external spaces have been created. The internal spaces are cleverly arranged for the building to be either a two-storey two-bedroom dwelling, with a separate entrance, or a ground-floor one-bedroom flat, with an upper-floor bedroom, with an ensuite bathroom, for residents of the earlier house. Alternatively that bedroom can be used by those residents as a library or study. On the ground floor is a living room, entered either from the earlier house via the passage, then through a lobby, or directly from the western garden. A compact kitchen is in the south-western corner, near the door from the garden. Here the internal space rises to the raked underside of the roof. The living room looks into, and has access to, a courtyard enclosed by white garden walls with geometric profiles complementing the lines of both houses. There is a small bedroom in the south-east corner, with an ensuite bathroom. A laundry, with an external door in the eastern wall, is off the lobby. A staircase leads from the lobby to the upper room, originally termed 'library'. It also has an ensuite bathroom. The subtle vertical flow of space can be appreciated here, as it rises to the raked ceiling and on into the 'tower'. Ample glazing, along a narrow balcony, lets in the northern sun and allows appreciation of the view. The highlight window of the 'tower' adds a dramatic touch to the interior. The addition is intact and has high integrity.

The house and its addition have clear architectural indicators of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic Style (1960-). The key indicator is the free, asymmetrical massing. A broad characteristic is that the buildings appears to grow from the site, now that the garden is mature. Other indicators of the style are complex angular geometry complementing nature; horizontal roof planes; horizontally-boarded fascias; clearly-expressed timber structure; highlight windows; horizontally-boarded balustrade. In the two parallel streams of modern architecture, the 'functional' attracted followers of Le Corbusier, while the 'organic' appealed to architects such as Taglietti. The authors of the authoritative study *Identifying Australian Architecture* noted "the more dramatic and spectacular aspects of organic architecture were to be seen in the idiosyncratic designs of Enrico Taglietti."¹ These aspects are seen to great effect in the McKeown house and its addition.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Soon after the National Capital Development Commission began operations in 1958 it laid out the then northernmost Canberra suburb of Watson, beyond the area of Griffin's 1918 plan of the Federal Capital and the 1956 statutory plan. Irvine Street was planned in a loop off the road through the suburb. When Block 30 of Section 47, Watson was auctioned in October 1962, William J. McKeown, who bid £600, was successful. A condition of the lease was that one building only was to be erected, for no less than £4500; commencement was required to be within six months and completion was to be 12 months later. By April 1963 Mr McKeown and his wife Robin had engaged the architect Enrico Taglietti and in July 1963 he produced the design of this, the first of his houses in Canberra.² Taglietti had practised in Canberra since 1956 and was known mostly for his Town House Motel, which opened in 1961. In that year his first house in Australia was completed at Currandooley, New South Wales, for Pat and Sally Osborne.³ In contrast to the rural setting of that house, the site in Watson was a standard suburban block. Taglietti designed this house, as he had at Currandooley, in what was described in 1966 as "his highly personal style ... outside the mainstreams of current Australian architecture ... but nonetheless invigorating and adaptable."⁴

Taglietti seized the opportunity to design a house in this innovative way for Mr McKeown and his wife Robin. Although they had no children, they asked for a two-bedroom house with the possibility of a future third bedroom. He was a public servant and she worked in health science.⁵ The house was completed by the builder, Georg Teliczan in July 1965.⁶

Taglietti was engaged by Mrs Robin McKeown early in 1993 to design a second home on her block in Watson, as an addition behind the house completed in 1965. Her husband had died and Mrs McKeown's mother planned to come to live with her, so a self-contained dwelling primarily for an elderly person was required. The second house was specifically designed as an addition, to satisfy the condition of the lease that "one building only was to be erected" on the block. Taglietti planned a ground-floor one-bedroom flat in the addition, accessible internally from the house, and an upper floor able to be used as part of that flat, or by residents of the main house.⁷

This was the first residence by Taglietti since he designed the house for Zarco Mijuscovic in 1980 and reflects a philosophy of houses appearing to grow from their sites, seen more fully in Taglietti's Sea Residence at Lilli Pilli, also designed in 1993.⁸ The addition to the McKeown house was completed in 1995.⁹

Twentieth-Century Organic Architecture and Influences on Taglietti's Architecture

Organic architecture is imbued with the principles and teachings of Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright is one of the most important figures in modern architecture and influenced architects throughout the world during the 20th Century. His 'Prairie' style of the first twenty years of the 20th Century emphasized the horizontal, using cantilevered forms, wide roof overhangs and open free planning with large areas of glazing, often crafted with leadlight designs. The use of geometric forms and extensive cantilevers, while based on Wright's work, is also a theme in modern Italian architecture and can be seen in the work of Valle, Sartago and Moretti.¹⁰

Enrico Taglietti

Taglietti (1926-) studied architecture between 1947 and 1953 and graduated with a *Laurea* (Doctorate) degree from the Milan Polytechnic, where architectural training methods were basically in the Bauhaus tradition, an approach to design whereby art and craft were united. The teachers included such prominent architects as Gio Ponti, Franco Albini, Marco Zanuso, Bruno Zevi and Pier Luigi Nervi. Observers suggest that it was Zevi's vision of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architectural style that appears to have most influenced Taglietti's architectural development.¹¹

Enrico Taglietti established his architecture practice in Canberra in 1956 and has constructed some of Canberra's most dynamic buildings including the Town House Motel, 1961, (demolished); Cinema Center, Civic, 1966; ACMA Conference Centre, Barton, 1967; Dickson Library, 1969; Flynn Primary School, 1972; Giralang Primary School, 1976; Apostolic Nunciature, Red Hill, 1977 and the Australian War Memorial Annex, Mitchell, 1979. Other than the McKeown houses, his most significant houses include Dingle house, Hughes, 1966; Paterson house, Aranda, 1970; Evans house, Cook, 1971 and Mijuscovic house, Wanniasa, 1983.¹²

Taglietti's desire to create beautiful architecture and satisfy the needs of his domestic clients was always critically important. He skillfully choreographed the experience of arrival at his houses. At times the front doors are not immediately apparent and can be difficult to find. A Taglietti house usually has a large, central space that acts as a social focus. He planned interlocked and interconnected internal spaces, including areas of differing heights, creating a variety of spaces that range from open to intimate. Walls, often extended to form enclosing courtyards, are used to shelter and to discretely reveal.¹³

Howard Tanner wrote in *Australian Housing in the Seventies*:

"The work of Italian-trained Enrico Taglietti ... shows the varied modelling and articulation possible within the domestic framework. Take as an example Taglietti's McKeown house in Canberra: tapering walls, cantilevers and roof planes tie together to make a very strong and carefully composed 'work of art'. Here plain building is transcended. The diagonal line, whether in tapered walls, sloping glazing, angled boarding, or plan elements, is a characteristic of this architecture."¹⁴

Enrico Taglietti is considered a key practitioner of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style in Australia.¹⁵ He was made a Life Fellow of the RAI in 2001 and his career reached a climax when he was awarded the Gold Medal of the RAI in 2007, the highest honour the Institute can bestow.¹⁶

ANALYSIS AGAINST THE CRITERIA PURSUANT TO S.10 OF THE HERITAGE ACT 2004:

(a) it demonstrates a high degree of technical or creative achievement (or both), by showing qualities of innovation, discovery, invention or an exceptionally fine level of application of existing techniques or approaches;

The 1965 McKeown house is a creative achievement by Enrico Taglietti, who carefully arranged its plan and designed its sculptural form, based on his new geometry for architecture, to create a work of art. The splayed corner windows and the roof design, with rainwater falling to a central gutter then spilling out as a garden feature, were most innovative. The approach to the front door through a walled garden was carefully planned to achieve a sense of arrival.

The 1995 addition to the McKeown house is a creative achievement of high value. The difficult problem of designing this unusual building, and requiring it to be linked to such an elegant 1965 house was solved most successfully. Within the addition the compact interlocking spaces are skillfully planned by Taglietti. The internal spaces are cleverly arranged for flexible uses of the residents. The addition is sited well, with the lush quality of the surrounding garden retained and intimate external spaces have been created.

The 1965 house and its 1995 addition are of exceptional interest for the opportunity they presents to demonstrate how the domestic architecture of Enrico Taglietti developed between 1963 and 1993.

(b) it exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group;

The aesthetic quality of the 1965 McKeown house is remarkable, due to the elegant splayed angles of the white walls and jewel-like corner windows, under a sheltering flat roof with long horizontal timber fascias. The house is an important example of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style of architecture in Australia. A key indicator of the style is its free asymmetrical massing. The complex angular geometry complementing nature, the clearly-expressed timber structure, the horizontal roof plane and the horizontally-boarded fascias are other indicators of the style. The setting, originally open, now has a mature garden which enhances the house. The living/dining/kitchen space and the master bedroom have generous windows allowing the back gardens to be appreciated from the interior. The prospect from the interior to the front garden and the street is more subtle, reflecting the need for privacy. The house fits well into the well-treed street environment.

The high aesthetic quality of the 1995 addition matches that of the 1965 house. Although it has vertical massing which contrasts with the horizontal proportions of the earlier house, the two buildings combine well visually. The addition provides the climax of the composition of the two, while not detracting from people's appreciation of the architectural quality of the earlier house. The natural setting and the free, asymmetrical massing are key indicators of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style (1960-) of which the architect Enrico Taglietti is considered a key practitioner. Taglietti continued to refine his version of the style in his own way over many years. Other indicators of the style are the horizontally-boarded balustrade, the highlight windows and the complex, angular geometry complementing nature. The compact interior has high aesthetic quality, due to the subtle flow of space, particularly up to the raked ceiling and into the high narrow 'tower', as well as the way it allows glimpses of the sky and treetops through the strategically-placed windows.

(f) it is a rare or unique example of its kind, or is rare or unique in its comparative intactness

This house and its addition have a degree of rarity by virtue of being among Taglietti's most successful domestic designs. They have rarity value by being designed by the same architect thirty years apart.

(h) it has strong or special associations with a person, group, event, development or cultural phase in local or national history

The house and its addition are important for their strong associations with the architect, Enrico Taglietti, who played a significant role in Canberra's cultural history as one of the most important architects to practice in the city. He was awarded the 2007 Gold Medal of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects for producing work of great distinction, mainly in the Canberra region, resulting in the advancement of architecture.

(j) it has provided, or is likely to provide, information that will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of the natural or cultural history of the ACT because of its use or potential use as a research site or object, teaching site or object, type locality or benchmark site

This house has some potential to be a valuable research and educational resource, particularly for students of architecture, building and design.

REFERENCES

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4. Cross-Section, University of Melbourne Department of Architecture, Issue no. 159, 1966.
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16. Charlton, op cit.