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HOPE BUILDING
-A HISTORY-

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This booklet was prepared by staff of the Office of National Assessments.

The Robert Marsden Hope Building was officially opened on Monday 5 December 2011 by Prime Minister the Hon. Julia Gillard MP.

Members of the Hope family attended the opening.

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Front cover image: Patent Office, Canberra, 1963
National Archives of Australia: A1200, L43786

National Archives of Australia: A12386, EO/1/2
On Monday 17 October 2011, the Office of National Assessments (ONA) commenced operations at the newly named Robert Marsden Hope Building in Barton, formerly the Robert Garran Offices and before that the Patent Office. For the first time since its creation in 1978, ONA has a building entirely to itself, having previously shared accommodation in Russell, first with the Department of Defence (1978–98) and later with ASIO (1998–2011).

In conjunction with ONA’s move to the Parliamentary Triangle, the Government approved the recommendation of Director-General Allan Gyngell that ONA’s new home be renamed in honour of Robert Marsden Hope (1919–99). Among the landmark achievements in a long and distinguished career was Hope’s work as head of two royal commissions on Australian intelligence and security (1974–77 and 1983–85). His far-sighted recommendations did much to shape the development of the national intelligence community.

One of key recommendations of the first Hope commission was the creation of an independent agency to provide national intelligence assessments directly to the Prime Minister. This led to the passage of the ONA Act in 1977 and the establishment of ONA the following year.

For ONA, the move from Russell to its new building presented both challenges and opportunities. To meet operational and security needs, extensive changes had to be made to the existing building, now owned by the Industry Superannuation Property Trust. ONA also wanted to provide its staff with high-quality, energy-efficient accommodation.

Equally important for ONA, though, was to achieve a result in harmony with the heritage values of its new building, which was placed on the Register of the National Estate in 1987 and is classified by the National Trust of Australia.

It’s worth noting, in this regard, that Hope was deeply committed to Australia’s heritage and played a major role in developing the concepts and approaches for protecting and conserving it. He was chosen by the Whitlam government to chair its Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate (1972–74), which laid the foundations for a strong Commonwealth role in safeguarding the natural and built environment. In 1978, he was appointed as the foundation chair of the council of the New South Wales Heritage Commission, a position he held until 1993.
A key feature of the new design was the demolition of the Annexe, added in the 1970s, which had obscured the original E-shaped design of the Patent Office building. The new design for ONA preserves nearly all of the original façade, most importantly the original main entrance facing Kings Avenue. Two new structures were added, nestled within the arms of the E-shaped original design, including a new main entrance. The inserts, mainly faced in glass, were designed to appear clearly distinct from the architectural style of the original building. Every effort has been made to preserve original features – jarrah flooring removed from the ACT Supreme Court has been re-used as decorative wall panelling in the main reception area and conference facilities.

**In the beginning**

While ONA's arrival has given the Hope building its new name, it was of course far from a new building. It began life as the Patent Office. Constructed between 1939 and 1941, the Patent Office was a major public building of its time, part of a second wave of construction that marked the resumption of Canberra’s gradual development after the hiatus of the Depression years.

Canberra’s first wave of construction had included the Provisional Parliament House, the Lodge, East Block and West Block, the first National Library, the Sydney and Melbourne Buildings, the Capitol Theatre in Manuka, the Australian Forestry School, the Hotel Canberra (forerunner to the Hyatt), Albert Hall, the Manuka Swimming Pool and the Australian Institute of Anatomy (from 1984 the National Film and Sound Archive). This wave of building ground to a halt with the Depression.

By the late 1930s, fiscal constraints had eased sufficiently to allow new projects to get under way. Although World War II would again interrupt Canberra’s growth, some important buildings were completed in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including the War Memorial (opened on 11 November 1941) a new hospital in Telopea, Ainslie Primary School, Canberra High School (later to become the Canberra School of Art) and the Patent Office.

**The Patent Office**

Like many commonwealth agencies in the decades after Federation, the Patent Office, proclaimed in 1904, had a somewhat nomadic existence, eventually moving to Canberra in 1933 with around 70 staff. It then spent a lengthy period in ‘temporary’ accommodation in a section of the Hotel Acton. When the Patent Office finally moved into its permanent building in August 1941, this was its fifth home.
Despite this migratory history, the Patent Office was an important and prestigious agency – then as now, new technology and innovation were seen as central to the nation’s future. The Patent Office library was Australia’s most extensive collection of scientific and technical literature.

At the laying of the foundation stones for the Patent Office building on 31 July 1939, Attorney-General William Morris Hughes emphasised the importance of innovation and Australia’s proud record in that field (while also poignantly commenting on the tensions that were about to launch the world into war):

*What the modern world owes to inventions is often forgotten … The magic of steam, the wizardry of electricity … The world today is sadly disturbing; daily conflicting national interests bring us nearer the abyss of war … Today above all else we are citizens of the world … international conventions governing patents and copyright are a step towards universal law ….*

Hughes went on to speak of Australian innovations, instancing Lawrence Hargrave as a pioneer of flight and H V McKay and T S Mort for their work on the combine harvester and the freezing of meat for shipment overseas.

Construction was completed in 1941, with Patent Office staff moving in in August. Despite the war, the vital work of registering patents went on – including registrations relating to the production of penicillin in 1942. The Patent Office was to remain in its Kings Avenue home for some decades after the war, but eventually it outgrew its building, moving to new accommodation in Woden in 1971.

**The ACT Supreme Court**

Provision for a Court Room in the Patent Office building is clearly indicated in design plans from 1937 – a large room in the northwest corner of the ground floor was designated as being for the ‘High Court’, with its own entrance facing National Circuit.

But there’s no evidence the High Court ever sat in the Patent Office building. Rather, it was the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory that moved in in January 1941, half a year before the staff of the Patent Office.

Like the Patent Office, the ACT Supreme Court had been in increasingly unsatisfactory temporary digs in a section of the Acton Hotel. It continued to occupy a suite of rooms on the ground floor of the Patent Office building until 1963. As well as the courtroom itself, this suite included a room for juries to retire to and rooms for judges and associates. A small cell, located in the basement, is preserved in the Hope Building.
**Other occupants**

The onset of World War II inevitably had a major impact on the use of the Patent Office building. With many Patent Office staff enlisting, its offices were left half–empty and some were made available to a variety of other tenants.

The British High Commission for a period occupied a section of the eastern wing of the upper floor. The Commonwealth Police (a forerunner of the Australian Federal Police) also used the building, as did the Commonwealth Security Service, formed on 31 March 1941 within the Attorney-General’s Department, with a wide range of national security responsibilities. The Security Service headquarters occupied nine offices in the building.

At its wartime peak in 1943, the Service had nearly 700 staff, more than half of them Army personnel but including also Air Force and Navy personnel, police and civilians. The Service also included representatives from the UK and US, though it’s not clear whether these officers worked in the Patent Office building.

The Service’s longest-serving Director was Brigadier William Ballantyne Simpson (1894–1966). After service in the Middle East, Simpson replaced W J McKay as Director of the Service in September 1942. He held the position until his resignation on 23 October 1945. On the next day, he was appointed sole judge of the ACT Supreme Court – also then lodged in the Patent Office.

The Security Service was disbanded in December 1945, with its functions absorbed into the Commonwealth Investigation Branch, the immediate forerunner of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO).

**Life after the Patent Office**

It had long been recognised that staff increases in the Patent Office would exceed the space available in the existing building. The National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) had reserved the adjacent site for an expected expansion.
A cover of the commemorative programme and menu for the dinner at the Hotel Canberra prior to the laying of the foundation stones for the new Patent Office.
Entrance Hall, the Patent Office, 1941

The Inquiry Hall, Patent Office, 1941
Aerial view south-west of Patent Office, Canberra, 1950

Group staff portrait, Patent Office, Canberra, 1956

National Archives of Australia: A1805, CU256/1
Western side National Circuit, 2011

Main entrance view, from Maquarie Street, 2011
In the event, though, the Patent Office moved to Woden in 1971 and the NCDC gave consideration to other uses for the building. Judging by one NCDC report, the Commission did not think highly of it:

*Although no amount of expenditure would bring it up to modern office standards, and aesthetically the building can hardly claim architectural significance, it could be committed to a further 20 years of life …*

After some refurbishment, the Public Service Board moved in to the building in October 1972. But long overdue refurbishment was delayed over costs. The building went through a period of neglect and was in some danger of demolition – a fate that sadly befell the original National Library, built in 1934 on Kings Avenue in a similar style and for some decades a near-neighbour to the Patent Office.

In 1978 it was decided that the Attorney-General’s Department would take over the building, following renovations and a major extension in the form of a three-storey addition at the rear of the existing building. This time around, the NCDC held a more positive view of the merits of the Patent Office building:

*It is of importance that the character of the building be retained … the entrance lobbies to the building are of architectural interest … the windows are of critical importance to the architectural quality. They display embellishments not readily available today.*

And a later NCDC report on the completed refurbishment noted

*Distinctive features … have been retained as far as possible … The external appearance of the building has been largely untouched and this approach has attracted favourable comment from the National Trust …*

The newly named Robert Garran Offices were opened by the Attorney-General Gareth Evans in 1983. The NCDC plan succeeded in preserving the Patent Office in large part, including its façade and grand entrance fronting Kings Avenue. But the large new addition to some extent overshadowed the old building and the original E-shaped plan was obscured.
**Henderson and Whitley**

The Patent Office building was the work of Edwin Henderson and Cuthbert Whitley. Both made important contributions to Canberra’s early urban development and to the evolution of its characteristic architectural legacy.

A British architect who moved to Australia in 1910, Edwin Hubert Henderson (1866–1939) built his career in Sydney before joining the public service, eventually being appointed Chief Architect of the Commonwealth in 1928. Apart from his work on the Patent Office designs, other prominent projects of his included Manuka Swimming Pool, major extensions and renovation at Government House Yarralumla, the base plan and layout for what is now RAAF Fairbairn, the Drill Hall, located in what is now the Australian National University and Forrest Fire Station (now Canberra Fire Museum).

Henderson was responsible for some of the early designs for the Patent Office. Sadly, he did not live to see its completion. He committed suicide in June 1939, a month before the laying of the foundation stones, apparently weighed down by the prospect of a Royal Commission investigating his role in the issuing of contracts for work at the Sydney General Post Office. The Commission was to exonerate Henderson. It fell to Cuthbert Whitley to complete the design detailing for the Patent Office and oversee its construction.

Cuthbert Claude Mortier Whitley (1886–1942), born in Victoria, transferred to Canberra in 1929 where he worked under Henderson. Promoted to senior architect in the Department of the Interior in 1935, the Patent Office was Whitley’s first big project. Other designs by Whitley included Ainslie Public School and Canberra High School (which became the Canberra School of Art in 1976) and a number of buildings at RAAF Fairbairn. He also made a major contribution to the development of early Canberra house designs, including the firemens’ residences surrounding Henderson’s fire station. Like Henderson, Whitley’s career was cut short. He suffered several strokes in late 1941 and died in 1942.

As designed and built by Henderson and Whitley, the Patent Office building bears many of the hallmarks of the Canberra architecture of its time, balancing monumentality with human scale and classical restraint with imaginative ornamentation.

Mindful of its placement within the Parliamentary Triangle and its function as home to an important national institution, Henderson and Whitley wanted the Patent Office to convey a sense of dignity and formality. Unlike the Provisional Parliament House, the Patent Office was designed from the outset as a permanent structure.
But even without the Depression, money was always going to be scarce for grand designs in the early decades of the ‘bush capital’. And in any event, Australian architectural tastes were moving away from the heavier, more ornate classical, baroque and neo-gothic styles of the Victorian era, favouring cleaner and more functional lines and also becoming more eclectic in the choice of ornament.

The design idiom employed by Henderson and Whitley in the Patent Office is often called the Inter-War Stripped Classical Style. In this style, architects by and large dispensed with the formal classical orders, but strove to retain a sense of classical proportion and symmetry – the attached fluted pillars flanking the Kings Avenue entrance are a clear echo of classical design.

Henderson and Whitley also used building materials well-suited to create a sense of dignity and solidity. The external walls were clad in Hawkesbury sandstone. The main entrance vestibules were detailed with black and white marble.

A stripped-down classicism, though, was always going to be at risk of looking bare, even blank. Henderson and Whitley introduced subtle but effective enrichments to avoid this and to give the building life and lift. They drew on the vocabulary of Art Deco, a style then steadily gaining traction in Australia. They did so in an understated way, given the formality appropriate for the Patent Office building. But the use of strong geometric forms and patterns, especially in the cast zinc window panels and in the bronze lanterns, lends character and individuality to the design.
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Opposite page image: Eastern Courtyard Garden
Office of National Assessments: image number 5637