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Canberra Modern's Edwina Jans, Rachel Jackson, and Amy Jarvis at Red Hill lookout. Jackson will be presenting a talk on Canberra's architecture in Palm Springs. **Picture: Jamila Toderas**

Canberra takes on California cool

As Canberra Modern heads to Palm Springs to highlight the city's design, AMY MARTIN looks at how modernist design influences Canberra's identity

Canberra is a city defined by its modernist architecture. Just as the capital's history - and appearance - is reliant on the work of Walter Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin, so is the architectural period which followed the Second World War.

When the Griffins won the competition to design Canberra in 1912, they did so with a plan that Griffin described as "ideal of the future". Little did he know that it would be some decades before Canberra's development would get the chance to really flourish. Two world wars and the Great Depression meant Canberra was relatively undeveloped for three decades. However, it was this post-war optimism that went on to create Canberra's - and arguably Australia's - architectural identity, with the help of the creation of National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) in the 1950s and its renewed push to develop and populate the national capital over the following decades.

Not only were Canberra's obvious modernist buildings - such as the Shine Dome and the National Gallery of Australia - constructed in this period, but everyday buildings also started to take on modernist designs. Shopping centres, swimming pools, schools and community centres appeared, as did newly built houses - and they were all considered drawcards.

Canberra became a playground and a design laboratory for architects and designers, explains Amy Jarvis - one-third of the crew behind design festival Canberra Modern, along with Edwina Jans and Rachel Jackson. And in doing so, it was a chance for Canberra to be a celebration of Australia, and to take on the identity of a bold national capital.

"It wasn't constrained by the shackles of colonialism in its design," she says.

"The National Capital Development Commission ... let the city build its own architectural identity which I think is unique for Canberra.

"There was this sense of optimism and bravery after the Second World War. After having gone through two world wars and being in a very different state after so much loss, there was this idea of needing to build a city from the ground up, with a new identity and a new aesthetic, but also embracing all the new technologies that came out of the war.

"Being able to use new materials in new ways, being able to experiment with flat roofs, using off-form concrete and untreated timber - using these different materials in different ways that would have been unheard of in the earlier periods of Australia's history and even internationally."

It's this time in the capital's history that



The diving board at Civic Pool features in the Canberra Modern logo. **Picture: Sarah Marshall**

will be in the spotlight when Canberra Modern heads to the United States for Modernism Week in Palm Springs, California, later this month. The annual celebration of mid-century modern design features more than 350 events and last year saw 152,000 people participate in a town of less than 50,000.

Among this year's programming includes a section on Australian architects, with one, in particular - Canberra Modern, Canberra

Cool - aiming to educate an international audience about the capital's design. And according to Jackson, who will be giving the talk in Palm Springs, it will also set the record straight once and for all, that Canberra is indeed the Australian capital - not Sydney or Melbourne as some people internationally seem to think.

Canberra Modern is one of the capital's biggest advocates, encouraging people to appreciate the heritage peppered around the city in the form of modernist design.

Sitting over a coffee within one such modernist design - the cafe at Red Hill Lookout - they explain their "stealth" approach to showcasing these buildings.

They're not over the top in their mission - hence their description of "stealth" - but through events (and even the illustration of the Civic Swimming Pool diving board on their logo) they hope to draw attention to the uniqueness of these designs. By shining a light on these buildings here in Canberra and now, internationally, they hope that people start to appreciate these 1950s-70s gems as architectural heritage.

"It's not just about the timing of development, although that's absolutely critical to its history, but it's what Australia wanted to say about itself," Jans says.

"It's a really unique and special place that deserves to be known worldwide, both for the fact that it is the capital city - and some people don't even know that - as well as the fantastic beauty and the fabulous lifestyle that it affords people."

That's really where the upcoming talk at Modernism Week began - as a mission to



Canberra children at Giralang Primary School, shortly after the Enrico Taglietti building was open in 1976. Picture: Max Dupain

The Cameron Offices by John Andrews, 1976. Picture: Supplied

Urambi Village by Michael Dysart, 1976. Picture: Supplied

tell the international community about the beauty of Canberra.

Jarvis was awarded the Churchill Fellowship that last year took her and Jans to Palm Springs to research and take part in Modernism Week in order to better understand advocacy and engagement around design.

They spent nine days learning how the event grew from one event of 12 people, held in someone's living room, to a must-go experience for anyone interested in mid-century design.

The idea was to implement their findings for the annual Canberra Modern festival - which they have done for this year's upcoming event - but it also introduced the organisation and Canberra to the international platform. When the idea was pitched as an event focused on Canberra design, both parties were keen to bring it to the stage.

"It's our opportunity to talk about Canberra as a designed city ... on an international stage," Jackson says.

It's interesting that from an international audience's perspective, Canberra - and in particular its architecture - is so unknown. Particularly when taking into consideration the international approach the National Capital Development Commission took when creating it.

The commission not only looked at international examples to emulate, they also brought in exports from overseas to help design the cityscape.

Harry Seidler - who was behind the Edmund Barton Building among others - was originally from Austria. Enrico Taglietti - whose Canberra creations included Giralang Primary School - was born in Italy. And Alex Jelinek - who designed the Benjamin House in Deakin - was born in the Czech Republic.

"The NCDC was a little bit parochial, but they wanted to be seen as doing the abso-

lute best they could for the future, for the longevity," Jackson says.

Likewise, Australian architects were able to use their work in Canberra as highlights - if not as launching pads - for their own successful, and at times, international careers. Roy Grounds' Shine Dome, John Andrews' Cameron Offices and Robin Boyd's Churchhill House are all works of people considered some of Australia's leading architects.

But as amazing and notable these structures - and architects - are, that's just the start of modernism in Canberra.

"People who were attracted to Canberra to live here were also interested in experimenting themselves with those sort of kit homes, and then you've got those community, cooperative housing complexes like the Urambi model and the Wybalena Grove model," Jans says.

"You didn't just have the Roy Grounds and the Shine Dome, but equally, because Canberra was a city built to be a community and the scene of democracy, it has that democratic feel about it as well. I think that's a really important part of the story as well.

"The experimentation around the name architects - the John Andrews' Cameron Offices, for example - sadly, a lot of that we've lost without really appreciating what the innovation was that he was trying to achieve with that particular complex of buildings."

Of course, Canberra is not the only city that embraced modernist design, enhancing itself with the clean lines of the style. Palm Springs, for example, wouldn't even have Modernism Week if it wasn't for its continued embrace of the style. But somewhere along the line, cities such as Palm Springs, Los Angeles, and Denver in the US, and even places such as Chandigarh in India, seemed to be remembered for their modernist architecture, while Canberra's designs remain relatively unknown internationally.

Many of the places that you see through Palm Springs and California would happily fit into the suburbs of Canberra and many of the places you see in Canberra would not look at all out of place in the US.

Amy Jarvis

"There are a lot of similarities between the designs," Jarvis says.

"Many of the places that you see through Palm Springs and California would happily fit into the suburbs of Canberra and many of the places you see in Canberra would not look at all out of place in the US, and elsewhere internationally as well because many of them are planned on those key principles of modernism that the architects like Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Bauhaus were teaching at the time."

Flat planes, clean lines, and little ornamentation characterised the buildings, along with angular features. A lack of front fences showed off the design and - along with the construction of public spaces such as Civic pool - aimed to create a sense of community.

The time was also one in which the car was king, and many designs included a carport to show these vehicles off.

But while these teachings were employed in Canberra's structures, just like they were elsewhere, there was something that separated the capital from other modernist cities. And it's something Canberrans have become increasingly proud of, so much so it has been featured on ACT number plates.

"What Canberra is unique for is the bush capital setting and that landscape setting where the buildings are nestled into and among the trees," Jarvis says.

"Our good friend Darren Bradley, who is an architectural photographer, once said that Canberra is one of the most difficult places to photograph because the trees are in the way of the buildings.

"But that's something that is unique about Canberra and special, that you live within the landscape, within a building, rather than these buildings sitting as monuments in empty spaces. I think that's where Canberra is different from the US."