

The village people: how years of neglect created Oaks Estate's unique character

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It's the ACT village where residents can get the NBN but not an ACTION bus.

Canberra's forgotten corner, Oaks Estate, has been dealt another blow after the ACT Heritage Council this month rejected a bid to provisionally list the village on the ACT's heritage register, 16 years after the application was first lodged.

While two expert reports commissioned over the past decade recommended heritage protection for Oaks Estate, the council ruled the village was not historically or architecturally significant enough to meet the criteria for a listing.

It was another slap in the face for a neighbourhood used to being overlooked by the ACT, Kate Gauthier of the Oaks Estate Progress Association said.

From her squat, sunlit duplex, built two decades before the site for the national capital was even chosen, she said it was the antipathy of successive governments towards Oaks Estate that forged the village's unique character.

"It's the neglect that has actually created the sense of place," Ms Gauthier said.

"Electricity was actually brought to Oaks Estate privately by the people who lived here, they paid for it to come here themselves. Jervis Bay got piped sewage and water from the Federal Capital Authority before Oaks Estate did.

"We even had to get a grant from the federal government to build a public toilet in the park. The heritage council jacked up the cost by forcing us to get a heritage-looking crapper, and now they're saying there's no heritage value."

The heritage council claims its only recommendation was what colour it should be, and said this would not have added much to the cost.

Oaks Estate Progress Association vice-president Hugh Griffin said given this history, the heritage council's decision was "concerning but not surprising".

"That level of insulting, contemptuous neglect [towards Oaks Estate] is replicated across every other agency in Canberra," Mr Griffin said.

"If you go back in the history of Oaks Estate [the government] refused our children diphtheria vaccinations in the '30s. Then they refused them a school. Then they refused them a bus to a school. Then they refused them a bridge to cross the train line so they could get to schools in Queanbeyan. Then they refused them gutters, drains, electricity, water, sewage, streets."

A long history



Oaks Estate has had its application for heritage listing knocked back by the ACT Heritage Council. *Photo: Finbar O'Mallon*

Oaks Estate predates the national capital by at least 80 years.

Before the the 1920s, the settlement served as a base for workers building the early parts of Canberra.

Housing shortages in the capital and freehold land drew settlers to the village. Oaks Estate only converted to leasehold in 1974.

Its proximity to Queanbeyan's licensed hotels also helped, given Canberra was under prohibition at the time.

But the village suffered for a lack of amenities, as authorities saw it as a temporary workers' settlement.

Piped water wasn't introduced until 1938 and the sewage system wasn't hooked up until about the 1970s.

Sewage allowed medium-density housing to be built and in the late 1970s the government snapped these blocks up for public housing.

The public housing mix in Oaks Estate [is 10 times higher than the Canberra average and 20 times higher than the national average.](#)

That and a reputation for crime has drawn unwanted attention to Oaks Estate (although [ACT Policing's crime statistics for the January to March](#) quarter showed more reports in the ACT's two other villages, Hall and Tharwa).

Hidden value



Oaks Estate resident Sheb Harrop and his two dogs (big dog) Lexie and (black dog) Sabre. *Photo: Karleen Minney*

But there's much more to Oaks Estate than meets the eye.

The National Trust's heritage spokesman Eric Martin said the precinct had significant Indigenous and Chinese history, including Chinese garden markets.

"That Chinese contact and influence is rare, it doesn't exist elsewhere in the territory," Mr Martin said.

The housing stock is eclectic, organic and stands in stark contrast to Canberra's planned avenues, Mr Martin said.

Ms Gauthier said that patchwork gave Oaks Estate historical value as a precinct.

"As a single house that's not valuable but when you have all of these 1940s houses together, you can't just knock one down and build a McMansion," she said.

Not that locals were against development, she hastily added.

"Because we have these empty lots here, people are not anti-development, we actually see the value in development because it will bring a lot of infrastructure here. We might actually get a corner shop, we might actually get a bus," she said.

Ms Gauthier said she wanted the same protections for Oaks Estate as the village of Hall.

"This is a rare area and we think there are development opportunities here for both the government and the community to make this a heritage location that could be shared with the broader Canberra community and not locked off just for locals," Ms Gauthier said.

Expert opinion quashed



Kate Gauthier outside her family's Oaks Estate home. *Photo: Jamila Toderas*

Oaks Estate historian Karen Williams said she knew reading the first line of the ruling the heritage council had looked at Oaks Estate the wrong way.

By the heritage body defining Oaks Estate as a precinct, Ms Williams said it had ignored its Indigenous history or the European buildings since demolished.

"You can't treat Oaks Estate like anywhere else," Ms Williams said, adding it didn't fit the definition of a village, suburb or anything else.

But a spokeswoman for the heritage council defended the decision and the time it took to reach it.

"The Oaks Estate precinct was included in the priority list for assessment in 2014 and has been under active assessment since this time and has been considered at 13 meetings and has been the subject of several site visits by the council and staff of ACT Heritage," she said.

"The reports [done previously] were considered and the council used its own independent expertise and experience to come to an independent conclusion regarding the heritage significance of the place as required under the Heritage Act 2004.

"As the council's decisions are notifiable instruments, ie, they are a part of the ACT's legislation and become law that binds people and property, and are subject to review in [a tribunal], they must be held to a much higher level of scrutiny than is possible in a consultant's report, which needs only to deliver an opinion, albeit an expert one."

Ms Gauthier slammed the whole exercise as a waste of taxpayer money.

"What an incredibly wasteful way to run an agency," she said.

A different feel



Hiroshi Yamaguchi of Koitoya Design/Make/Teach. *Photo: Finbar O'Mallon*

Oaks Estate's slower pace of life is what drew furniture craftsman Hiroshi Yamaguchi to set up shop in an old shelf factory in William Street, where the original company name is still stamped on the tin facade.

He walks his dog along the river corridor every day and says Oaks Estate has "a different feeling" to other Canberra suburbs.

Antique furniture restorer Martin Lott said the place hadn't changed in the 30 years had had been working there, although he conceded it might now with a series of new units to be built.

Oaks Estate Progress Association president Adam Stephan-Slade said he and his partner were drawn to the village because it felt like the small country towns they grew up in but was only 15 minutes from Canberra's centre.

"It speaks back to where we're from," Mr Stephan-Slade said.

Sheb Harrop was homeless before he finally secured a place in Oaks Estate.

"Most of us ended up out here because we found ourselves on the wrong side of the tracks, now we're out here healing ourselves. This is the second stage of my life," Mr Harrop said.

This story was found at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/the-village-people-how-years-of-neglect-created-oaks-estates-unique-character-20170424-gvkygk.html>