

THE NEW AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES REPOSITORY IN DARWIN

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In 1969 the then Commonwealth Archives Office commenced a programme of upgrading or renewing its repository facilities throughout Australia. The programme has now begun to bear fruit in that new repositories have been completed or are nearing completion in Sydney, Darwin and Perth and planning is complete for a regional facility in North Canberra and for extensive additions and modifications to the present Adelaide building.

The story of the Darwin building began in 1966. In September of that year, at the request of the Northern Territory Administration, the Commonwealth Archives Office despatched an officer to the Territory to investigate the archival needs of Commonwealth Agencies based there. The survey carried out would have been no surprise to most of us, describing as it did the appalling state of records accumulated in Darwin, Alice Springs, Tennant Creek and other settlements notorious for their heat, humidity and insects. Some 430 Commonwealth Agencies were in need of proper archival services. Some records had been lost or destroyed, unauthorised disposal had been common.

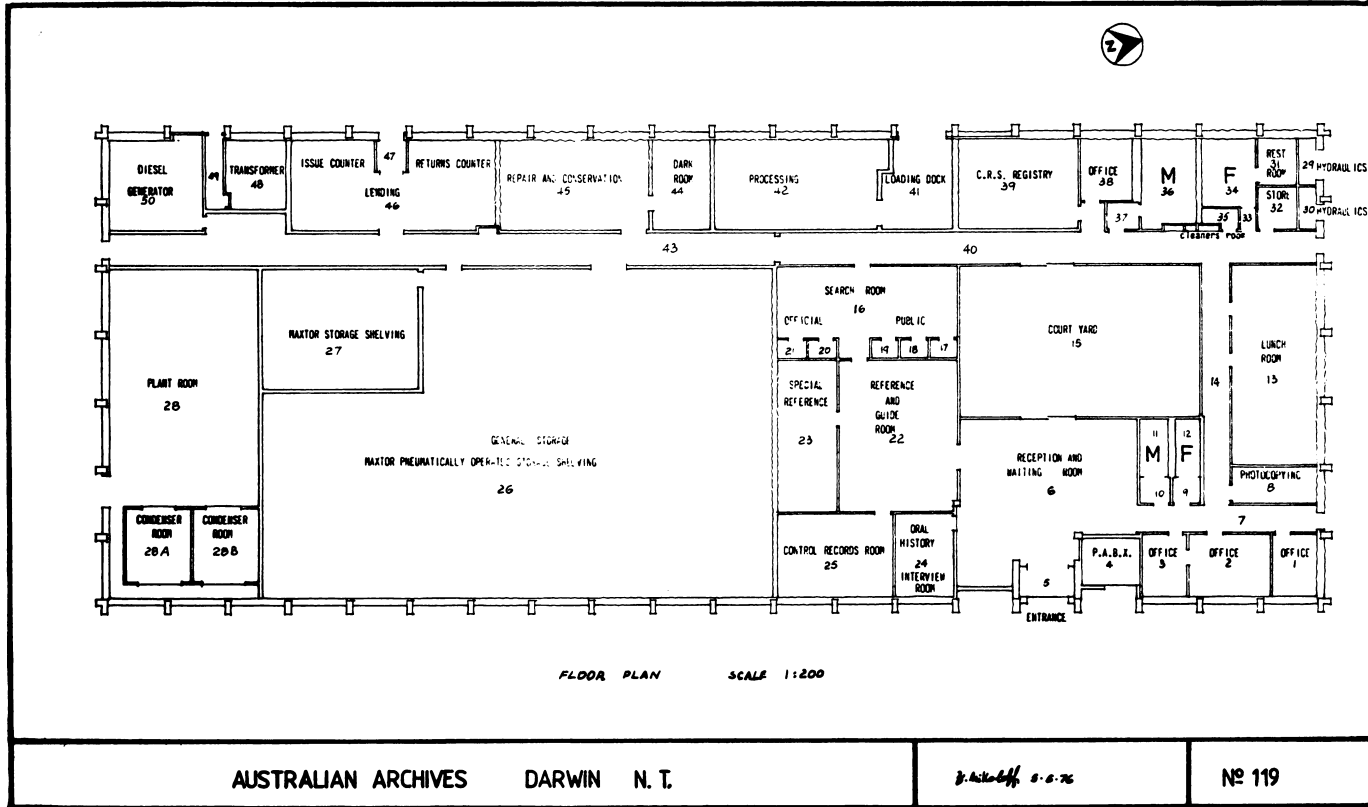
Armed with the results of the survey the Commonwealth Archives Office in 1967 secured the allocation of a site in Darwin for a repository. This site was later rejected in favour of one more suitable, in the suburb of Nightcliff.

In 1968 a specialist branch, Repository Management, then only recently established within the Commonwealth Archives Office, commenced the planning processes required for a project of this type and a preliminary 'Statement of Requirements' was drawn up which contained a general statement of the functions of the proposed building:

To receive, cleanse, fumigate, restore and preserve to the highest possible degree Commonwealth records selected for permanent retention (in the process arrange for the controlled disposal of temporary elements), to service these records to client agencies and in accordance with Commonwealth Access policy, provide to accredited applicants Search Room facilities and services and to offer to client agencies facilities for advice and where necessary training in archives procedures.

The 'Statement' was developed into a functional 'brief' for the architects (Commonwealth Department of Works, Adelaide) which contained four main divisions: (a) General Conception; (b) Functions and inter-relationships of areas; (c) Specific requirements within each area; and (d) Common services. As a later development our building briefs now contain additional divisions reflecting the specialized nature of storage and care of varying record formats and individual 'user' areas.

It is convenient to discuss the building in terms of the original brief although it was later modified; the repository was only handed over to us in June and at the time of writing is not fully operational.

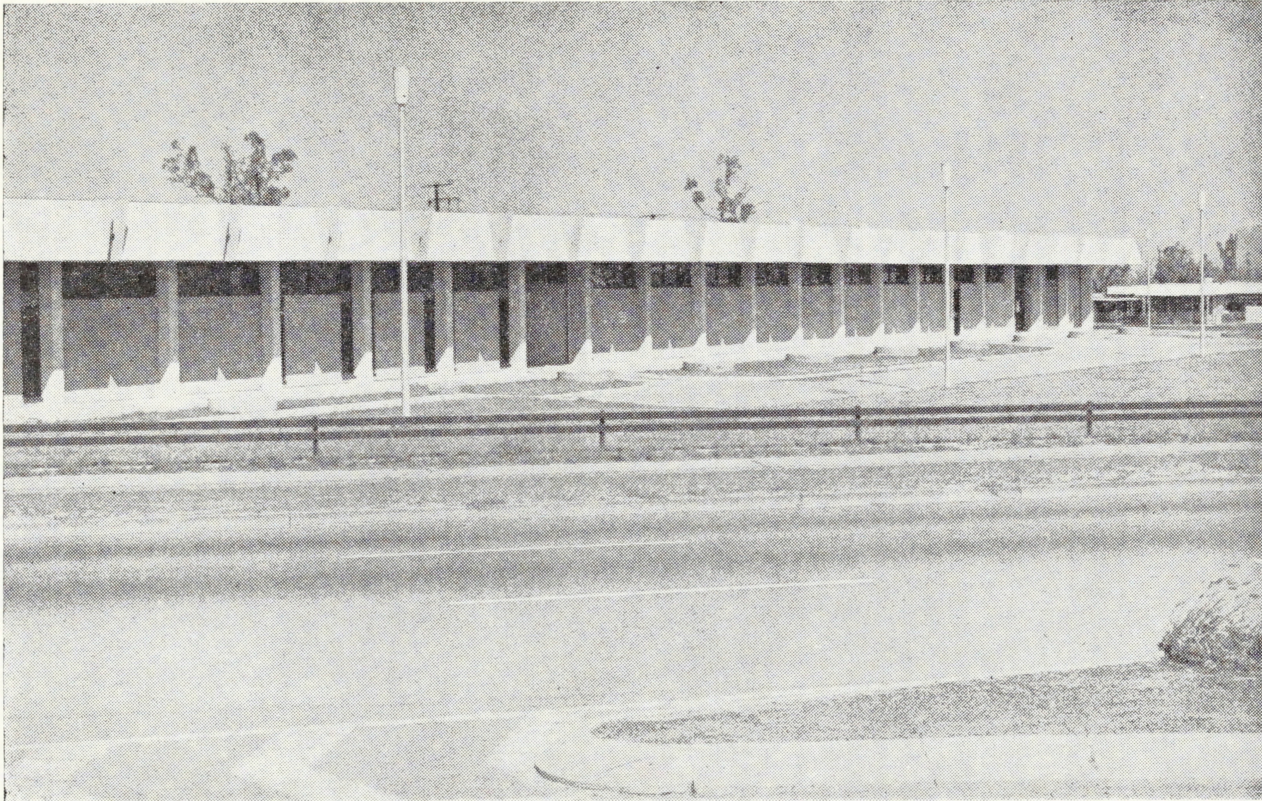


AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES DARWIN N. T.

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Floor-plan of the interior of Australian Archives' new repository in Darwin.



The exterior. The building has been designated a "primary cyclone shelter" for use by the citizens of Darwin.

The brief pointed out that the building would establish a range of basic archival services in the Northern Territory (storage, retrieval, conservation) and provide reference and access facilities for officials and the public. The initial structure was designed to meet these basic requirements for eight to ten years; however the brief also stated that:

The material growth in the volume of records being transferred to archival custody and the progressive definition of the requirements of users will mean that in due course the building will have to be modified and developed. Design should therefore allow for the expansion of the storage and the office/special purpose areas respectively as future circumstances dictate.

The philosophy of building archival repositories shown in this quote is important and one that has been followed in all subsequent buildings: that extension to the original construction will probably be necessary and that the nature of archives and their needs are ever changing. This has become particularly apparent in recent years with the increasing use of audio-visual and machine-readable records in Commonwealth Departments. It means that archivists can no longer merely place paper files in boxes and store them on shelves but must provide the conditions and equipment whereby these newer forms of records can be safely stored, retrieved and utilised. This must influence the very nature of the buildings constructed.

The functions and inter-relationships of the principal areas of the Darwin building were described by explaining the activities of archives staff, official and private researchers and the treatment and movement of records within the building. Visitors and researchers would enter the building into a reception area incorporated within an exhibition facility. They would then move to the Reference and Guide Room to begin their inquiries and determine which archives they wished to consult. The room would contain finding aids produced by the Australian Archives, official and private publications and guides to the holdings of other institutions. Archives staff would be available for consultation with researchers. The adjacent Control Records Room would house registers and indexes produced by the departments and agencies as guides to their own records and transferred, together with those records to the Archives. Immediately accessible to visitors would be the Search Rooms where selected records would be requested and consulted. Facilities in the Search Rooms would allow the use of typewriters, tape recorders and microfilm reader/printers. The time will undoubtedly come when computer facilities will need to be available for the use of machine-readable records.

A Special Reference room was provided for more individualistic work. The Northern Territory repository has a special responsibility, because there is no State Archives as such, to cater for the needs of special interest groups, such as local historians and educational institutions. An Oral History area was included to provide facilities for the examination of personal archives and to undertake interviews.

The non-public areas of the building would include spaces for staff engaged in preparation and maintenance of Australian Archives control records relating to material in custody in the repository and in the departments; conservation, records processing and lending (the

Australian Archives accepts into custody large quantities of records still current as far as the transferring department is concerned) and of course storage facilities.

Being located in a tropical zone, special consideration was given to conservation and storage facilities. Protective conservation was to be provided in two major ways: (i) by providing air conditioning to a high degree of tolerance within the storage areas and areas where archives were likely to be consulted within the building; and (ii) insulating the storage areas by constructing the interior ceiling of reinforced concrete thus forming a solid 'blockhouse' which would give cyclone protection and make it easier to maintain constant temperature and humidity levels.

The conservation laboratory would be capable of extension to include a large-scale fumigation facility and extra work areas. As it is, and again recognising the climate, all water introduced into the laboratory for conservation purposes will be passed through a purifier and then through apparatus with which the conservator can 'dial' the temperature of the water according to his needs. (The town water supply temperature is often slightly warmer than that in, say, Canberra or Melbourne.)

Records storage would initially be provided for 20,000 linear feet of records with fire extinguishing to be provided by smoke detectors and sprinklers in the general storage areas and a Carbon Dioxide flooding system in the vault. We have since opted for the more recently developed B.T.M. gas extinguishing system in vaults as it is safer, more economical and does not result in as significant and abrupt change in temperature and humidity when discharged.

Construction of the building began in February 1974.

Cyclone Tracy

Structural work on the building was about one-third completed when Cyclone Tracy struck Darwin on Christmas Eve 1974. The effects on Darwin generally are now well known and those on Commonwealth records vividly portrayed by Neville Corbett in this journal.¹ Little damage was sustained by the uncompleted building, located in one of the worst hit areas of Darwin, but we feared that completion of the repository would be deferred. The building was felt to be important to departments and the community, however, and the Darwin Reconstruction Authority reinstated it to the works programme in April 1975. The building, completed in April 1976, has an area of some 22,000 square feet. The storage areas have capacity for 20,000 linear feet of material on eight feet high compactus shelving.

Following the cyclone the Commonwealth Department of Construction in Darwin undertook investigations and have now put to us suggestions to further 'cyclone proof' the building. These principally relate to maintaining air-conditioning services to the storage areas during an actual cyclone by modifying plant-room entrances and air intake ducts and providing debris screens over windows fitted with impact resistant glass.

The records evacuated to Brisbane by the R.A.A.F. after the cyclone

will be returning to Darwin in July 1976. The completed building has been designated a 'primary cyclone shelter' for use by the citizens of Darwin in time of need.

The lengthy periods that archival institutions have to wait for proper and adequate facilities are well known. The Australian Archives in Darwin was no exception, but the new repository has been worth waiting for.

REFERENCE

1. Neville Corbett, 'Damage to Records in Darwin caused by Cyclone Tracy', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 6, No. 3, May 1975, pp. 91-95.