**Communications Centre, John Gorton Building, Parkes, ACT**  
*Also known as the bunker*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finance ID Number</th>
<th>DFD-61008</th>
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</table>
| Commonwealth Heritage List (CHL) Place ID Number | Communications Centre: [105618](#)  
Also listed as part of the Parliament House Vista: [105466](#) |
| Current Status (including CHL Place ID Number) | The Communications Centre is listed on the Commonwealth Heritage List ([CHL Place ID: 105618](#)).  
The Central National Area has been nominated to the National Heritage List and is under consideration by the Australian Heritage Council ([NHL ID: 106100](#)).  
The Communications Centre is also included as part of the Parliament House Vista as a contributory element ([CHL Place ID: 105466](#)). |
| Ownership | The Communications Centre is managed by the Department Finance on behalf of the Commonwealth. |
| Location | The Communications Centre, also known as ‘the Bunker’, is located in the sub floor level of the John Gorton Building.  
The John Gorton Building and Communications Centre are a total block development located on Block 1 Section 35, Parkes, ACT. The site is bounded by King Edward Terrace to the |
north, Parkes Place to the west, King George Terrace to the south and Dorothy Tangney Place to the east. The property is located in the suburb of Parkes, three kilometres south of the Canberra City Centre.

![Communications Centre location.](image)

### Description

The Communications Centre is a secure, underground structure, beneath the southern entrance forecourt area and the southern car park area of the John Gorton Building. It was constructed as a secure Communications Centre complex between 1974 and 1977 with steel lined walls and concrete super structure.

The Communications Centre was vacated in 1996 and remained unoccupied until 2002/2003. The images taken during the refurbishment are included in Annex B and provide a visual record of the changes that were made during the refurbishment, including the introduction of lightwells into the bunker. The refurbishment was undertaken to provide a high quality and modern working environment. The refurbishment included the introduction of six lightwells through the car park above and down into the building. The exterior of the light wells located to the immediate south of the John Gorton Building (three lightwells) are clad in pale pink granite to match the granite of the John Gorton Building Ground Floor. The works carried out in 2003 introduced four sunken garden spaces through the centre of the building, supplying natural light into the Communications Centre.

The Communications Centre is accessed through the lifts of the John Gorton Building, a refurbished lift area which links through to the lobby area. This lift area features glass panelling that has been printed with the images of botany images from Captain Cook’s first voyage. The lobby area, with chrome leaf ceiling and chrome clad columns, was refurbished with the installation of an equitable access ramp and interpretive material display.

The Communications Centre proper features a false ceiling, brick internal walls, and painted plasterboard finishes. As part of the refurbishment, the original sub-floor cavity that contained computer cabling has been adapted for the installation of in floor air-conditioning. A modern working environment has been created with open plan space with conference rooms, kitchenettes and bathroom facilities.
L to R: The Communications Centre foyer area; and interpretive display.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Landscape Setting</th>
<th>The Communications Centre is an underground, basement level structure and the landscape setting is that associated with the John Gorton Building.</th>
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<tr>
<th>Heritage Objects and Collections</th>
<th>The cultural heritage significance of the Communications Centre is enhanced by its moveable heritage items, which either directly relate to the purpose of the buildings and/or through significant artworks, including:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• An in situ art feature Aboriginal mural, ‘Djakaldjirrparr’ by Johnny Bulum Bulun of Maningrida, Arnhem Land</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The 'Night Wall' light display</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The Circuit Board montage two ribbed aluminium art works</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The retained graffiti wall segment and purpose-designed art works.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• The production of one ceramic panel, representing the theme of communications from the early Aboriginal art form to the present day of electronic communications</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Tallaringa Crafts Australia obtained the rights to a reproduction of a bark painting from the Art Gallery of New South Wales by the artist Mawalan Marika, of Dua Moiety Riratjingu tribe, the copyright being held by Wandjuk Marika.</td>
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</tbody>
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| 'Djakaldjirrparr' mural by Johnny Bulun Bulun. | Source: Department of the Environment, Barcode Number: dig008380 |
In 1943, the John Curtin Government established the External Communications Branch within the Department of External Affairs to handle all Government cablegrams for transmission to addresses outside Australia in either plain language, code or cipher, as well as all inwards cablegrams for the Australian Government.

In 1969, it was proposed that the Department install, as a matter of urgency, a computer controlled system to replace the manual systems operating in Canberra, London and Washington. From 1970 to 1972, the installation of a computer-based telecommunications control centre within the Administrative Offices building was considered. The feasibility study conducted in 1971 was also required to advise on alternative locations and assess the suitability of respective locations. The centre would need to operate for twenty-four hours a day seven days a week, with a single access security control point.

The Department of Works concluded that it was not possible to accommodate the computer in the building because of restrictions on floor loadings, the need for special wiring requirements and air-conditioning that would have reduced the ceiling height to less than the required seven feet. The McMahon Government initially approved the proposal. An underground office complex was then proposed to accommodate the centre, adjacent to the Administration Building, occupied at the time, by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Additional site constraints, relating to Cabinet approval for a new building in the Parliamentary Triangle, and cost estimate increases from $1 million to $2-$3 million required a further round of approvals. Following the change of Government in 1972, the Whitlam Government further considered the proposal, although Senator Cavanagh, Minister for Works, expressed concerns relating to its cost. The building proposal was approved by the Whitlam Government in 1973.

The design engineers for the complex structure were Rankine and Hill. Schmaehling Boys and Vickery Pty Ltd (Sydney) were the architects and interior designers. The Department of Housing and Construction managed the project on behalf of the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) and Wagdy Hanna was the Supervising Architect. He filled the role of Construction Project Leader and Design Project Leader for the Environmental Works and Security Works. Mainline Constructions won the tender and commenced work 26 August 1974. Following the demise of Mainline Constructions, Civil and Civic became the contractor with an expected date of completion being 3 August 1976 and an adjusted tender sum of $3,367,070.

The concrete building was 2 metres below ground level beneath the southern car park of the Administration Building (now John Gorton Building). Special features of the architecture included a single secure access point, radio frequency shielding to ensure that messages could not be monitored by individuals outside of the complex, automatic emergency power generators to ensure 24-hour operation, and the inclusion of substantial environmental artworks and design features to overcome sensory deprivation to staff, accommodated in offices without windows.

Construction of the new Communications Centre was completed and staff commenced staged occupation from March 1977. The completed Centre featured a wide range of interior artworks, lighting and detailed interior design to ensure sensory deprivation issues that may arise from working underground were prevented.

In 1979, the Communications Centre transitioned to full reliance on the new computer mainframe for all communications. The new mainframe commenced operation in February, with nodes in London and Washington brought online in April and July of that year respectively.
In 1987, The Administrative Building/John Gorton Building was listed on the RNE as part of the Parliamentary Triangle. The Administrative Building and Communications Centre were also individually listed on the Register of the National Estate.

The Communications Centre computer system simplified in 1988, with the nodes in London and Washington decommissioned. Following these changes, the Canberra mainframe operated the entire network.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (including the Communications Centre staff and some equipment) departed the building and relocated to the RG Casey Building in Barton in September 1999. The demolition of internal structures in the Administrative Building commenced in November.

The Communications Centre mainframe was replaced by a new system that was progressively implemented in January 2000 and completed in mid-June. The system was decommissioned on 23 June 2000 after 21 years of reliable global service.

From 2001-2003 Environment Australia implemented plans to refurbish the former Communications Centre for use by the Australian Greenhouse Office. Several light wells were constructed through the slab to accommodate the new use. A range of original artworks including the original 1970s foyer were retained during the refurbishment works. Environment Australia and the Department of Foreign Affairs conducted research projects and oral history interviews to compile a history of the Communications Centre and provide material for a permanent display in the new Greenhouse Office installed in the former Communications Centre.

In 2004 the John Gorton Building and the Communications Centre was gazetted for inclusion on the Commonwealth Heritage List.

**Statutory Heritage Values**

| Statutory Heritage Values | The Communications Centre is significant as a rare example of an underground bunker designed to provide a secure environment for the Commonwealth Government’s key communication network that functioned as such from 1978 to 1996. It is a rare example of underground building design that exhibited the best environmental provisions of the time for mitigating the sensory effects on staff of a windowless office. The concrete slab of approximately 450mm thick of reinforced high quality concrete is an uncommon technical feature. The Centre has significance for its association with the nation’s 'cold war' activities and the real fear of spying demonstrated by its steel sheathed dense concrete construction designed to obstruct spying on communications, and by the single access point. The Centre has significant, associated artworks. These include the mural, 'Djakaldjirrparr', |

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L to R: Three graphic panels of computer generated pattern and four panels of diagonal lines; Green and red arrow graphic panels in corridor and security door; Microscopic fibres, Microchip, Nautilus shell, Carved swirled edge of sofa.
Source: Department of the Environment, barcode numbers: dig008376, dig008371, and dig008384.
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<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A - Processes</td>
<td>The Centre has significance for its association with the nation's 'cold war' activities and the real fear of spying demonstrated by its steel sheathed dense concrete construction designed to obstruct spying on communications, and by the single access point. <strong>Attributes</strong> The steel-sheathed dense concrete construction and the single access point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B - Rarity</td>
<td>The Communications Centre is significant as a rare example of an underground bunker designed to provide a secure environment for the Commonwealth Government's key communication network that functioned as such from 1978 to 1996. It is a rare example of underground building design that exhibited the best environmental provisions of the time for mitigating the sensory effects on staff of a windowless office. The concrete slab of approximately 450mm thick of reinforced high quality concrete is an uncommon technical feature. <strong>Attributes</strong> Its underground location, relatively high-quality environmental provisions and thick reinforced-concrete slab.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C - Research</td>
<td>The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>D - Characteristic Value</td>
<td>The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E - Aesthetic characteristics</td>
<td>The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F - Technical achievement</td>
<td>The Centre has associated artworks that are significant for having been commissioned to combat sensory deprivation. <strong>Attributes</strong> The mural 'Djakaldjirrpaarr', the 'Night Wall' light display, the Circuit Board montage, two ribbed aluminium art works and the retained graffiti wall segment plus the remainder of the purpose-designed art works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G - Social Value</td>
<td>The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H - Significant people</td>
<td>The Centre includes the mural, 'Djakaldjirrpaarr', an in-situ work of art by the artist, Johnny Bulun Bulun. <strong>Attributes</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The mural 'Djakaldjirrarrp'.

**Criterion I - Indigenous tradition**

The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.

**Department of Finance's (Finance) updated heritage assessment**

**Finance's updated Statement of Significance**

The Communications Centre is significant as a rare example of an underground bunker designed to provide a secure environment for the Commonwealth Government's key communication network that functioned as such from 1978 to 1996. It is a rare example of underground building design that exhibited the best environmental provisions of the time for mitigating the sensory effects on staff of a windowless office. The concrete slab of approximately 450mm thick of reinforced high quality concrete is an uncommon technical feature (Criterion B2).

The design and construction of the Communications Centre as a 'bunker' that is integrated into the basement level of the John Gorton Building is a notable engineering and technical achievement. The 1998 refurbishment also demonstrated technical excellence through the introduction of light courts and the protection and retention of the Djakaldjirrarrp mural (Criterion F).

The Centre has significance for its association with the nation's 'cold war' activities and the real fear of spying demonstrated by its steel sheathed dense concrete construction designed to obstruct spying on communications, and by the single access point (Criterion A).

The Centre has significant, associated artworks. These include the mural, 'Djakaldjirrrarrp', an in situ art feature by the well-known artist, Johnny Bulun Bulun. Other art works, the Night Wall Light display, the Circuit Board montage, two ribbed aluminium art works, and the retained graffiti wall segment are significant as examples of the fifty purpose-designed art works commissioned to combat sensory deprivation (Criteria F and H).

It is important for retaining examples of 1970s style corporate entrance decor in its foyer, incorporating design features of a spiral ramp and, the 'Luxaflex' ceiling and the chrome plated balustrade, banisters and columns, designed to enhance light and movement by reflections (Criterion D).


**Criterion A - Processes**

The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.

**Criterion B – Rarity**

The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.

**Criterion C – Research**

The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.

**Criterion D – Characteristic Value**

The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.

**Criterion E – Aesthetic characteristics**

The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.
| Criterion F – Technical achievement | Additional information about the technical merits of the Communications Centre are:
The original construction and integration of the Communications Centre with the basement level of the John Gorton Building demonstrates strong engineering and technical excellence.
The introduction of light courts through the roof to provide for ongoing use of the building also demonstrates engineering and technical excellence.
The retention and protection of the Djakaldjirrparra mural during refurbishment works is also a technical achievement.
Assessment indicates that the threshold for this criterion is met. |
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<tr>
<td>Criterion G – Social Value</td>
<td>The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criterion H – Significant people</td>
<td>The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Criterion I - Indigenous tradition | The Communications Centre does not meet this criterion. 

**Non-Statutory Listings**

| Register of the National Estate (RNE) | The Communication Centre was included in the Register of the National Estate (ID 103843) in 1987. In February 2012, the RNE became a non-statutory archive. |
| National Heritage List (NHL) | The Central National Area has been nominated to the [National Heritage List](https://www.environment.gov.au) and is under consideration by the Australian Heritage Council (NHL ID 106100).
This nomination covers a substantial part of the early central suburbs of Canberra including the Parliamentary Zone. The primary focus of the nomination is the historic planning of the early areas of Canberra, and the residual integrity of these planned elements.
A determination on whether this nomination will be accepted by the Australian Heritage Councils yet to be made. If the listing proceeds, the John Gorton Building and Communications Centre are likely to be contributory elements in the finalised citation. |
| ACT Heritage Register | The John Gorton Building was nominated for inclusion on the [ACT Heritage Register](https://www.environment.gov.au), however, as the John Gorton Building is already listed on the [Commonwealth Heritage List](https://www.environment.gov.au), the ACT Heritage Council decided not to include the John Gorton Building on the ACT Heritage Register (April 2013) as it would provide no additional protection to the heritage values of the place. |

**Additional information**

| Property Access | The Communications Centre is a secure government office building, and access is available by appointment only. |
| Consultation | Department of Finance consulted with Environmental Resources Management Australia Pty Ltd, the National Capital Authority, and internal Finance stakeholders and contractors. Environmental Resources Management Australia Pty Ltd also consulted with the Registered Aboriginal Organisations as part of the heritage values assessment process.
Any additional consultation with other interested parties should include the [Compliance](https://www.environment.gov.au). |
**Conservation Documents/References**

- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2000), Decommissioning of the communications mainframe. In DFATNEWS Vol 7 No. 9.

**More information**

For further information regarding the Communications Centre, please contact the [Department of Finance](mailto:finance@finance.gov.au).