

NON-STATUTORY BACKGROUND INFORMATION For DICKSON LIBRARY

As of 7 July 2008

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PLACE

- Dickson Library, Dickson Place, Section 30, Block 13, Suburb of Dickson, ACT.
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HISTORY OF THE PLACE

The Dickson Library was designed by Enrico Taglietti in 1968 for the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), construction being completed in 1969¹, as part of the new suburb of Dickson. Trevor Gibson, the chief Planner of Canberra between 1949 and 1958, planned the layout for Dickson. The planning greatly diverged from Walter Griffin's planning intent for the suburb. Griffin had proposed this area as the industrial zone of Canberra. In 1950 the decision was made to alter this and Canberra's new industrial activity was to be concentrated on the south side between Jerrabomberra Creek and the Molonglo River, at the new industrial suburb of Fyshwick. In the planning of the new suburb of Dickson, Gibson diverged from Griffin's general suburban planning of Canberra with a concentration of urban activity along avenues, to avenues as through traffic corridors and detached houses on single residential blocks.²

The suburb of Dickson began development in 1958 and to this day consists primarily of individual houses with about 20% of the dwellings being townhouses and about 25% flats and units. An aerial photograph taken in 1959 shows detached housing being developed in the southern part of the suburb inside Dooring Street and McGowan Street, and along Moncrieff Street and Hope Street.³

After the establishment of the NCDC, in 1958, the ideal of distinctive, innovative architecture was expressed as part of the character of the new capital. The NCDC selected architectural firms that had shown they could produce innovative buildings.

The NCDC chose a rectangular site for the library that was already enclosed by street paving. The site determined the overall dimensions of the building perimeter.

Prior to Taglietti being commissioned for the library, the first civic library in Canberra other than the now demolished National Library, Barton, he had received some architectural acclaim with the Italian Embassy and a small number of residential projects. The library was Taglietti's first commission for the National Capital Development Commission. The Commission agreement was signed in April 1968 with a building works budget of \$220,000. At first the NCDC required a traditional documentation and building process, however, once the sketch design had been approved the NCDC instructed the architect to document the building as it was being constructed thus instigating a "Fast Track" design and build process. The library was tendered with a provisional bill of quantities based on the sketch plan drawings and some preliminary working drawings, and A V Jennings was awarded the contract for \$177,171. The structural engineers were K Sellick and Associates. The library 'hand over' was on 7 November 1969 and it opened on 1 December 1969. The final contract sum was approximately \$179,000, \$205,000 including fit-out and furnishings.⁴

Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor believes "The exuberance and formal play of Taglietti's architecture has no parallel in the country. It strangely combines the gaiety of much Italian, free-form construction with the sobriety of the heavy forms of Japan's post-war architects. It is an architecture fashioned for mood and visual delight." She believes "his most accomplished early building (is) the library for the suburb of Dickson".⁵

Dickson Library was awarded the inaugural RAI ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award for a public building in 1995, which is awarded to places of architectural significance that deserve heritage protection. This award was presented prior to most of the internal changes being carried out.

The Dickson Library is featured in major national publications including Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor's, *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, RAI, 1990. Taglietti considers it to be one of his most important early works

Twentieth-Century Organic Architecture and Architectural Influences on Taglietti's Architecture

Organic architecture is imbued with the principles and teachings of Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright is one of the most important figures in modern architecture and influenced architects throughout the world during the 20th Century. His "Prairie" style of the first 20 years of the 20th Century emphasised the horizontal using cantilevering forms, extensive roof overhangs and open free planning with extensive areas of glazing, often crafted with leadlight designs.

The use of geometric forms and extensive cantilevers, while based on Wright's early work, is also a theme in modern Italian architecture and can be seen in the work of Valle, Sartago and Moretti.⁶ At the base of Moretti's apartment and office building in Via Rugabella, Milan, the tower sits into the lower level with the lower level wall cut at an angle similar to Taglietti's angled cuts into perimeter walls to some of his buildings, such as the Dickson Library.

Enrico Taglietti is considered a key practitioner in the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style in Australia.⁷

Accretions to Dickson Library

It is not intended here to set out an extensive detailed history of the changes to the building that are primarily to the interior.

The original Dickson Library had a strongly symmetrical plan. The entry lobby was to the south as it is now, however, it extended nearly the full width of the building and opened onto a wide central front counter. To each side of the lobby were exhibition cases, three to each side. The public passed either side of the front counter and through a narrower central opening into the library proper. At the centre of the open planned library was a mezzanine structure raise up above the main floor level approximately 1200mm. The mezzanine walls where constructed in brick and the catalogues were located along these walls. The mezzanine had timber railings and a timber stair rail. Set approximately 1350mm beneath the mezzanine was a plant room that housed the services. Along the east and west sides of the library were the book stacks with the capacity to hold approximately 30,000 books and 10,000 children's books. At each corner of the main central space were sitting/reading areas that overlooked and opened out onto the courtyards through glazed sliding doors. Each of the landscaped courtyards had a square pond that received the stormwater runoff. To the north was an exhibition/community spaces with associated toilets and a kitchenette. These spaces were for activities such as music performances, displays and school visits.

In 1997 automatic doors and after hours book return shutes were installed.

The most detrimental changes to the original fabric of the building occurred circa 2001.

Externally the natural light grey coloured fibre sheet fascia has been replaced with a matching profiled but a green 'Colorbond' metal fascia and the dark eaves lining has been replaced with a light coloured fibre sheet lining. These two external changes to the fabric detract from the original design intent where the fibre sheet resembled concrete and the cantilevered roofs were to have a deep dark shadow.

Internally the mezzanine reading area and associated lower level has been removed; toilet facilities have been located near the entry; the book stacks have been reorganised; the front counter has been relocated and replaced; the administration space has been rearranged; the exhibition space has been altered by the enlarging of the staff room that encroached into this area, and the wet areas have been modified.⁸

The central mezzanine reading area was a fundamental component of the initial open plan design where it separated the varying areas; for children, adults and display.

The library's play of space incorporating the mezzanine can be contrasted with the library designs of Alvar Aalto, the internationally significant 20th Century Finnish architect, where the central reading areas in his libraries were recessed a half level down as opposed to Taglietti's raised reading area. Taglietti was aware of Aalto's work.

Enrico Taglietti

Taglietti studied architecture at the Milan Polytechnic, after the WWII, subsequent to spending much of his youth in Eritrea. Gio Ponti was a senior lecturer at the Polytechnic, a Bauhaus modernist and one of Italy's most important architects and founder, in 1928, of the journal *Domus*. Taglietti believes he was an excellent teacher who influenced him in these early years, however, it was the ideas of Bruno Zevi at the School of Rome that had the greatest influence on Taglietti. Zevi had recently returned from the USA and brought with him the knowledge of F L Wright and his 'natural' or organic architecture as opposed to 'rational' architecture. Zevi headed the Istituto Nazionale di Architettura in Rome and also edited the journal *L'Architettura*. Taglietti found himself being educated in Milan but his preferred philosophy of architecture was being taught in Rome. The work of the BBPR was also an early influence on him with its style referencing to tradition and local environment.⁹

Taglietti's interest in concrete and its plastic forms came directly from his early experiences in Italy. In Italy reinforced concrete is a relatively inexpensive construction material compared with other construction materials such as steel. The material has a long history of being used in exceptionally innovative ways with the work of Nervi, Montuori, Figini & Pollini, Michelucci, Valle, and others

Enrico Taglietti came to Australia from Italy to design the Italian promotional display for a department store in Sydney. While in Australia he was invited to design the Italian Embassy. He established his own architecture practice in Canberra in 1955 and has constructed some of Canberra's most dynamic buildings including; the Town House Motel, 1961, (demolished), Cinema Centre, Civic, 1966,(now extensively altered internally), ACMA Conference Centre, Barton, 1967, (altered), Apostolic Nunciature and Chapel, Red Hill, 1977, Australian War Memorial Repository, Mitchell, 1979, a number of schools including at Giralang, 1976, and various houses including Dingle House, Hughes, (De Quetteville), Paterson House, Aranda, McKeown House, Downer.¹⁰

The Dickson Library is one of two libraries Taglietti has designed, the other is in St Kilda, Victoria. There are important works in Sydney including the Smith House, Pennant Hill, 1965 and the St Anthony's Church, Marsfield, 1968.¹¹ He also produced work in Hobart and Melbourne.

Associate Professor Jennifer Taylor believes "The freedom of his work contrasts with the functional rigidity of much of Canberra's architecture." "Baffle walls and mouldings, stepped and curved forms, come not from the rational dictates of structural determinism, but from his abstract patterning of the shapes of the building to create interest through striking visual spatial effects."¹²

Taglietti has written of his architecture: "Architecture is the Art of making spaces work for people, is human made environment on which the lives of our children will unfold, is the Matrix that transforms static places in to a dynamic assembly of voids that excites emotions

alive with users. Is 'Piazza del Palio', 'Central Park', 'Chartre', the Opera House... is the 'Invisible Canberra' of dreams".¹³

Enrico Taglietti was made a Life Fellow of the RAI A in 2001. He is a Knight of St Gregory and Knight Officer of the Italian Republic.

Taglietti's buildings have received many awards in addition to the award for the Dickson Library including the RAI A ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion and Twenty Five Year Award for the Giralang School, and nine Architecture Merit awards from the RAI A ACT Chapter. He has been recognised by the RAI A ACT Chapter as one of the two most eminent members still practising in Canberra, the other being Romaldo Giurgola who is semi-retired.¹⁴

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLACE

The library is an example of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic Style (1960-) with its horizontal roof planes and complex, angular geometry complementing nature.¹⁵

Dickson is an inner northern suburb of Canberra to the east of Northbourne Avenue, the main entry avenue into Canberra from the north. The library is located within the Dickson Centre, the main retail and business centre to the inner north of Civic. The library is sited on the northeast side of the centre surrounded by pedestrian paths, a small public square to the south, a secondary street to the north and carparks to the east and west resulting in all facades to the building being prominent.

The design solution, a sculptural building form in an urban context, was conceived as a 'peninsular' attached to the shopping complex with a "piazza" or "town square" in front of the building, to the south.¹⁶ This open urban setting enables its scale and form to be appreciated from all four sides.

The "off form" concrete perimeter walls, 48.8m x 30.5m, and the spreading deep fascia cantilevering flat roofs define the building's form. In plan, the four walled corners are left open to create small landscaped courtyards where water is collected from large open spouts into concrete draining pools. The three circular hollow section pipe spitters were originally red but have now been changed to a brown colour.

The perimeter in situ boarded concrete walls are incised with slots and angled cuts to create a dialogue with the surrounding urban centre. The tall corner angled forms of the walls define the rectangle of the plan as well as enhancing visual protection to the semi-private courtyards.

The horizontal roof and deep fascia forms create deep, shadows below the fascia. This emphasis on the horizontal and the deep shadows created is an important theme in Taglietti's 'organic' architecture. The replacement of the original dark soffit lining with white lining has negated somewhat the original design intent.¹⁷

The entrance to the library is from the south. The floor plan is based on a cruciform within the overall rectangle, with interconnecting stack and reading areas under one roof. From inside the library the full height glazing to the walled courtyards provides natural light and enhances the feeling of openness. The perimeter east and west wall glazing extends the full width and the sill is placed above stack height to enhance the privacy of the user from the passing traffic and pedestrians.

The internal planning has been altered over the years. At present the entry is combined with public toilets. The most radical change has been the removal of the central raised mezzanine, where there once was a raised intimate reading area there is now a vinyl floored computer terminal space all at the main floor level. Additional staff accommodation is located to the north along side a room for community activities and associated toilets. The stack and reading areas extend along the west and east sides; these would appear to

be the only unaltered major interior spaces.

The perimeter 2.6 metre high plasterboard flat ceiling is raised at an angle that mirrored the stepping up of the half-height mezzanine level. A timber framed diffused lighting system is located across the full extent of the raised ceiling.

Taglietti describes the library as being “conceived as a totality and is comprised of related elements that are essential in defining the spatial experience”, ie the architectural volume and emotional response; these elements were:

- The mezzanine (the heart of the building);
- The four supports;
- The roof;
- The four courts, and
- The external walls.¹⁸

Construction generally is in reinforced concrete to the floor slab and perimeter off-form horizontal boarded walls. The inner courtyard walls are brown face brickwork. The windows are “Plas-steel” plastic coated steel frames. The roof is framed in steel and timber and clad in metal sheet and a green painted metal fascia has replaced the original light grey coloured fibre sheet fascia that alluded to a concrete roof form. Internally the walls are painted brickwork and off-form concrete; both were originally left unpainted.

Condition

The building is in good condition externally. The green colour of the new fascia instead of the original light grey colour detracts from the original concrete aesthetic implied by the natural colour of the fibre sheet fascia. Internally much has been altered. The removal of the raised central reading area has had a major affect on the architectural space of the interior, however, it is believed that the structure and fabric are in store and can be reinstalled when its heritage value is more appreciated.

Design Comments

The following design features are of additional significance: the deep sculptural form of the fascia alluding to off form concrete; the surrounding sculptural horizontally boarded insitu grey concrete perimeter walls; face brickwork, the remains of the original clear timber finish internally; open planning; courtyards with their stormwater features, and varied ceiling heights.

Comparisons with other Canberra examples of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style buildings are interesting because the comparison will probably be with another of Taglietti’s own works. The library can be compared with the Giralang Primary School Complex, 1976, that has, in principal, a similar cruciform plan. The location of the school library at the centre of the plan can be compared with the Dickson Library that had as its ‘heart’ the raised reading area.

The library can be compared and contrasted with the Belconnen Library, constructed in 1982, and designed by Robin Gibson for the NCDC. The Belconnen Library was awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Canberra Medallion in 1982. Both buildings are located in satellite centres and incorporate a forecourt plaza in their planning. Both are modest buildings given strength and presence by the use of bold concrete work and sculptural forms incorporating deep shadowing. The forms of the Dickson Library contrast with the Belconnen Library which is asymmetrical and cubiform in overall shape and incorporates a small upper level community room with dramatic affect over the entry while the Dickson library has a low horizontal emphasis typical of the organic style with complex angular geometry.¹⁹

The Woden Town Centre Library and Health Centre, constructed in 1977, designed by Ancher Mortlock & Woolley for the NCDC is another example of a civic library located in a satellite centre in Canberra during the expansion of Canberra in the period of the NCDC. The designed of two separate structures united by the use of the same materials, cream

coloured cement block and smooth concrete, and a linking concrete pergola is of some local architectural interest but is not as significant as the other two libraries.²⁰

REFERENCES

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- 4 Taglietti op cit; and *Architecture in Australia*, August 1970.
- 5 Taylor, Jennifer 1990 *Australian Architecture Since 1960*, RAI A 1990
- 6 Hatje, Gerd, (ed) 1965 *Encyclopaedia of modern architecture*, Thames and Hudson, London.
- 7 Apperly, Richard, Robert Irving and Peter Reynolds 1989 *Identifying Australian Architecture Styles and Terms from 1788 to the Present*, Angus and Robertson.
- 8 Report from the RAI A ACT Chapter on proposed redevelopment and site visits.
- 9 Taglietti, op cit.
- 10 RSTCA & RAI A 1982 *Canberra An Architectural Guide To Australia's Capital*
- 11 Taylor op cit.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Enrico Taglietti's Curriculum Vitae.
- 14 RAI A
- 15 Apperly et al, op cit
- 16 Taglietti, op cit.
- 17 Ibid. This work was carried out with Taglietti's involvement.
- 18 Ibid
- 19 RSTCA.
- 20 RAI A 1982 *Canberra An Architectural Guide To Australia's Capital* .

Other Information Sources

Architecture in Australia, August 1970.

RAI A ACT Chapter RSTCA Citation on Dickson Library