

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

CITATION

MR GEORGE RICHARD TIBBITS

George Richard Tibbits graduated in architecture from the Department of Architecture and Building at the University of Melbourne in 1962 before undertaking postgraduate studies there in town and regional planning. After working as an architect in London and Melbourne, Tibbits returned to the University. For twenty-eight years, from 1968 until 1995, he taught architectural history and over this period, he established a national reputation in teaching and research: firstly, through the development of a rigorous and comprehensive architectural history curriculum unmatched in Australia and secondly, through a body of detailed personal and student-focussed research work and publications, with special emphasis on 19th Century Victorian architecture and the early history of central and inner-suburban Melbourne.

As a result, Tibbits had a significant and continuing presence in Australian architectural historiography. The author of a myriad of writings that included monographs, book chapters, journal articles, exhibition catalogues, conference papers, book reviews and dictionary entries, his work has influenced architectural historians, conservation professionals, architectural educators and successive generations of students at the University of Melbourne. Tibbits did not have a singular outlook. His expertise spread across a range of periods and subject matter. This deliberate placement of his research energies across a broad field meant that he was a pioneer in each of the areas that he chose to study and on which he so eloquently reported. Above all, Tibbits was interested in a history of ideas and for this, his practice as an architectural historian was exemplary.

Themes of design composition, urban morphology, planning, politics and social justice characterise his writings on architecture. His co-authored book and exhibition, *Port Phillip Colonial 1801-1851* (1989), was a groundbreaking piece of research as were his typological analysis of the Federation house form in Melbourne and his definition of the so-called Melbourne Domestic Queen Anne. His writings on the classical tradition in Victoria set the scene for scholars since to look beyond mere documentation in favour of rich design traditions embodied within the Nineteenth Century. His work on the high-rise projects of the Housing Commission of Victoria from the 1930s to the 1960s is a compelling socio-political critique combined with documentary scholarship. Later writing by Tibbits on Camp Pell and the housing conditions of post-war migrants was equally telling in its focus on issues previously untouched by architectural historians. Tibbits' writing on the architect Robin Boyd was also perceptive, so much so that twenty years after his article was originally published, its reprinting demonstrated the continuing relevance of Tibbits' poignant criticism. As with so much of his writings, especially his numerous *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entries, the economy of Tibbits' prose harboured deep and defining observations. They have provided a wealth of clues for future scholars.

Much of Tibbits' research reflected his aesthetic and political interests. His writing on the classical tradition reflected his love of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and the broad-ranging interests of British architectural historian and curator of Sir John Soane's Museum, Sir John Summerson. Tibbits' work on the Federation house was in many ways a tribute to his academic mentor, David Saunders. His research on the Housing Commission of Victoria paralleled his personal involvement in environmental activism. In 1969 Tibbits was a foundation member of the Carlton Association in its siege against the Victorian Housing Commission's notions of 'slum' clearance and urban renewal. The group was involved in protests against some of the most controversial re-development plans in Melbourne's history and was arguably the most politically successful residents' action group that Melbourne has seen.

In 1973, Tibbits was the joint recipient of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Robin Boyd Environmental Award for his critical analysis of State Government urban renewal and slum clearance policies and practices.

Tibbits' activism and his deliberate fostering of expert knowledge of Melbourne's inner suburbs amongst students and staff affected generations of future heritage practitioners and practising architects. Tibbits, his colleagues and his local community were instrumental in the strengthening of an emergent conservation movement in the early 1970s and agencies such as the National Trust and the Historic Buildings Council of Victoria (now Heritage Council), the latter being a statutory body of which Tibbits was a foundation member, serving from 1974 until 1977.

Tibbits served as Chairperson of the Department of Architecture and Building at the University of Melbourne from 1977 until 1980 and Associate Dean (Research) from 1986 to 1989. In 1991, Tibbits was appointed by the then Vice-Chancellor David Penington as Conservation Adviser to the University of Melbourne. Following his retirement in 1995, Tibbits was appointed in 1996 as a Senior Associate of the Australian Centre, where his research centered on the study and documentation of the history of the University's planning and many of its significant buildings, including the Old Quadrangle, System Garden, Old Arts Building, Conservatorium of Music, the Gate Lodge and the Grainger Museum, culminating in his co-authoring of a guide to the University's buildings and residential colleges in 2003 and his sole-authored monograph, *The Quadrangle: The First Building at the University of Melbourne*, in 2006. This research, together with Tibbits' authoritative presence on the University's Heritage Committee ensured the ongoing retention and celebration of the University's oldest and most revered structures.

George Tibbits was also an acknowledged expert in another cultural field: music. He was a significant contemporary Australian composer, having written between 1964 and 2006 more than forty individual compositions, including music to accompany poetry by Vincent Buckley, Lynne Strahan and Kenneth Slessor. In 1976 he was awarded the Albert H Maggs Award for Musical Composition. His work has been performed by all ABC symphony orchestras and leading Australian ensembles and soloists. As a composer, Tibbits was largely self-taught, acquiring a theoretical grounding through the study of composers such as Arnold Schönberg (1874-1951) and John Cage (1912-1992). "Indeed, 'he wrote in 1976', as an outsider in music, I have been greatly stimulated by the critical disinterest and hostility which my participation has created". Listed in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, he was described as a composer whose music was "notable for intellectual humour and an avoidance of pretension". The same can be said for his writings on architecture. They are clear, precise and, like his William Morris shirts, they elicit joy in the sheer intellectual and aesthetic pleasure with which one reads his prose. For many around him, Tibbits was the supreme architectural gentleman.