

Register of Significant Twentieth Century Architecture

RSTCA No: R054

Name of Place: Dickson Library

Other/Former Names:

Address/Location: Antill Street DICKSON 2602

Block 13 Section 30 of Dickson

Listing Status:	Registered	Other Heritage Listings:	
Date of Listing:	1986	Level of Significance:	Local
Citation Revision No:	3	Category:	Educational
Citation Revision Date:	November 2004	Style:	Organic

Date of Design:	1967	Designer:	Enrico Taglietti
Construction Period:	1968-69	Client/Owner/Lessee:	NCDC for Dept Interior
Date of Additions:		Builder:	AV Jennings

Statement of Significance

The Dickson Library is an example of significant architecture and an educational resource. It is a good example of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic Style (1960-). The design incorporates complex, angular geometry complementing nature, and horizontal roof planes. It is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Enrico Taglietti.

The following design features are of additional significance; the deep horizontal fascias, insitu board patterned off-form concrete walls, plastic covered steel glazing frames, face brickwork, clear timber finish internally, open planning, courtyards, and varied ceiling heights.

The 'free' design of the complex demonstrates an important development in architectural style in the 1960s by contrast with the more rationalist architecture in Canberra at that time.

The library was awarded the RAI A ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1995.

The original interior design was significant; it provided an open plan solution, with a central mezzanine level articulating areas for children, adults and display.

The complex is important for its strong association with the talented architect Enrico Taglietti who is considered a key practitioner in the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style in Australia. This complex is featured in a number of important publications. Enrico Taglietti played and still plays a significant role in Canberra's cultural history. He is one of the most important local architects to practice in Canberra and this is a major work in his career. He believes that this project is an important building in his architectural. Enrico Taglietti was awarded a Life Fellow of the RAI A in 2001.

The Dickson Library is one of the two most important works of architecture in Canberra by the leading local and nationally significant architect Enrico Tagliette. The other is Giralang School and Health Centre complex, Giralang, 1976.

The architecture of this complex may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories.

Description

Dickson Library, 1969, by Enrico Taglietti, is a good example of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic Style (1960-) with its complex, angular geometry complementing nature, and horizontal roof planes.

Dickson is an inner northern suburb of Canberra abutting onto 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 to two sides and a secondary street and carpark to the north 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.

The "off form" concrete perimeter wall forming a rectangular perimeter 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 form 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 been changed to a brown colour.

The perimeter insitu boarded concrete walls are incised with slots and angled cuts to create a dialogue with the surrounding urban centre. The walls' tall corner "stacks" define both 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 dark shadows below the fascia. This emphasis on the horizontal and the deep dark shadows created is an important theme in Taglietti's "organic" architecture. The replacement of the original dark soffit lining with white painted metal decking has negated somewhat the original design intent.

The entrance to the library is from the south. The plan is based on a cruciform within the overall rectangle, with interconnecting stack and reading areas under one roof. The walled courtyards provide natural light and enhance the feeling of openness through their full height glazing. The perimeter walls protect the privacy from the passing traffic with the full width glazing placed above stack height.

The internal planning has been altered over the years with the exhibition space to the north being changed to provide additional staff accommodation, a room for community activities and additional toilets. The space around the entry has been altered with toilets added and the reception counter reworked. The most disappointing change has been the removal of the central raised mezzanine, the "heart" of the library. Where there once was a raised intimate reading area there is now a vinyl floored computer terminal space all at the main floor level.

The stack and reading areas appear to be the only unaltered interior space.

The plasterboard ceiling level 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.

The original library was designed to provide stacks for 30,000 books with associated reading areas and an exhibition space. Additional activities such as music performances and school visits were also allowed for.

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 are:

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

Construction generally is in reinforced concrete to the floor slab and perimeter off-form horizontal boarded walls. The inner courtyard walls are a 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 natural grey asbestos sheet fascia that alluded to a concrete roof form. Internally the walls were face brickwork and off-form concrete; both are now painted. The ceiling is plasterboard. Little of the original study carrels, shelving, work counters, benches, tables and the built-in timber reception counter, some combining laminated worktops and face brick supports still remain after the major renovation.

The additional significant design features are; horizontal fasciae, the surrounding sculptural horizontally boarded insitu grey concrete perimeter walls, face brickwork, the remains of the original clear timber finish internally, open planning, courtyards, and varied ceiling height.

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

The library is well maintained and in good condition, although much of the original interior 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. The green colour of the new fascia instead of the original grey colour detracts from the original concrete aesthetic implied by the natural colour of the fibre sheet fascia.

Condition and Integrity

Background/History

The Dickson Library is one of two libraries Taglietti has designed, the other is in St Kilda, Victoria. It was “his most accomplished early building”.

The library was Taglietti’s first commission for the National Capital Development Commission and was designed during a period in Canberra’s history when the NCDC were “commissioning buildings which would demonstrate the maturity of the city by an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments” **CT** The NCDC at first required a normal 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.

Organic architecture is imbued with the principles and teachings of F L 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 emphasized the horizontal using cantilevering forms, extensive roof overhangs and open free planning with extensive areas of glazing, often crafted with leadlight designs.

The original Dickson Library had a strongly symmetrical plan with the mezzanine level at its heart.

The library has been refurbished:

Externally the natural grey coloured fibre sheet fascia has been replaced with a matching profiled but green coloured metal fascia.

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 reorganized; the front counter has been replaced; the administration space has been rearranged; the exhibition space has been altered and is now a community space and the enlarged staff room has encroached on this area, and the wet areas have been modified.

The mezzanine was a fundamental component of the initial design that provided an open plan solution, where the central mezzanine level articulating areas for children, adults and display.

The library is greatly valued by the community, evidenced by the numbers of people who take advantage of it and their comments.

Its design 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. It would be considered unthinkable to fill in these lowered floor levels of Aalto's libraries on the grounds of access and would result in condemnation from the international architecture and heritage community.

The installation of toilets at the entry and changes to the front counter alter the symmetry and impact of this space. It is quite unfortunate to place toilets at the entry to the library as a public facility to be used off the street.

"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. "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."

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 my dreams."

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 and 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. Another early influence on him was the poetic style by reference to tradition and local environment of the work of the BBPR.

Taglietti's interest in concrete and its plastic forms comes 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

The use of geometric forms and extensive cantilevers, while partly based on F L Wright's early work, is also a theme in modern Italian architecture and can be seen in the work of Valle, Sartago, Moretti. 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.

Dickson Library was awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1995, which is awarded to places of architectural significance that deserve heritage protection.

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

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, which has now been 'cut out' due to access and supervision requirements.

Other examples of his work include the Town House Motel, 1961, (demolished), Cinema Centre, Civic, 1966, (now extensively altered internally), `ACMA Conference Centre, Barton, 1967, (altered), Embassy Complex for the Republic of Italy, Deakin, 1967, Apostolic Nunciature and Chapel, Red Hill, 1977, Australian War Memorial Repository, Mitchell, 1979, the schools previously mentioned above, Forrest Child Care Centre, Forrest, Woden Youth Centre, Philip, and various houses including Dingle House, Hughes, (De Quetteville), Paterson House, Aranda, McKeown House, Downer.

There are important works in Sydney including the Smith House, Pennant Hill, 1965 and the St Anthony's Church, Marsfield, 1968. He also produced work in Hobart and Melbourne.

The Dickson Library is featured in major national publications and was considered by Taglietti to be one of his most important works, up until the internal renovations removed the mezzanine.

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

Analysis against the Criteria specified in Schedule 2 of the Land (Planning and Environment) Act 1991

(i) a place which demonstrates a high degree of technical and/or creative achievement, by showing qualities of innovation or departure or representing a new achievement of its time

The creativity of the architect Enrico Taglietti is apparent in the design of the Dickson Library, 1969, which was innovative when compared with other public complexes built in Canberra. The Library is one of the two most important works of architecture in Canberra by the leading local and nationally significant architect Enrico Taglietti. The other is the Giralang Primary School complex, Giralang, 1976.

It is the only library designed by Enrico Taglietti in Canberra and was commissioned by the NCDC. It is his earliest public building in Canberra and one of his most innovative and significant works of architecturally.

The 'organic' design of the library demonstrates an important development in architectural style in the 1960s by contrast with the more rationalist architecture in Canberra at that time.

The original interior design was significant; it provided an open plan solution, with a central mezzanine level articulating areas for children, adults and display.

(ii) a place which exhibits outstanding design or aesthetic qualities valued by the community or a cultural group

The Dickson Library is a good example of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic Style (1960-) with its complex, angular geometry complementing nature, and horizontal roof planes. It is notable for displaying the high design skill of the architect Enrico Taglietti.

The following design features are of additional significance; deep horizontal fascias, insitu board patterned off-form concrete walls, plastic covered steel glazing frames, face brickwork, clear timber finish internally, open planning, courtyards, and varied ceiling heights..

The library is highly valued by the RAIA as an excellent example of this style of architecture by a leading local and nationally significant architect. It was awarded the RAIA ACT Chapter Twenty Five Year Award in 1995, (prior to the mezzanines removal) an award to places of architectural significance that deserve heritage protection.

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

The library is greatly valued by the community.

(iii) A place which demonstrates a distinct way of life, taste, tradition, religion, land use, custom, process, design or function which is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost, or is of exceptional interest;

The design of the library demonstrates an important development in architectural style that has extended through the 20th Century, by contrast with traditional architectural styles. Relatively few public buildings were built in this style in Canberra. Modern architecture, including Organic architecture, was the most important architecture of the 20th Century. Organic architecture had as its origins the work of F L Wright in USA. Walter Burley Griffin worked for Wright and brought the ideas of organic modern architecture to Australia when he was awarded the design of Canberra. While there are no buildings designed by Griffin in Canberra there are a small number in State Capital Cities. Canberra is one of the few 20th Century designed cities in the world. The combination of modern architecture and urban design is of exceptional interest.

(vi) A place which is a notable example of a class of natural or cultural places or landscapes and which demonstrates the principle characteristics of that class;

The residence is a notable design in the Organic style. It contains the key elements of the style in an economic form. The original design gave definition to differing functions, in particular the raised mezzanine. The design resolves its urban setting with an accomplished methodology through the use of walled courts and cantilevered forms.

(vii) a place which has strong or special associations with person, group, event, development or cultural phase which played a significant part in local or national history

The library is important for its strong association with Enrico Taglietti who played and still plays a significant role in Canberra's cultural history. He is one of the most important architects to practice in Canberra and this is a major work in his career.

Enrico Taglietti was awarded a Life Fellow of the RAlA in 2001.

The Dickson Library is featured in major national publications and is considered by Taglietti to be one of his most important works.

The library was Taglietti's first commission for the National Capital Development Commission and was designed during a period in Canberra's history when the NCDC were "commissioning buildings which would demonstrate the maturity of the city by an architectural distinction missing in most post war developments."

(xi) a place which demonstrates a likelihood of providing information which will contribute significantly to a wider understanding of natural or cultural history, by virtue of its use as a research site, teaching site, type locality or benchmark site

Through its architectural style, planning and urban form this building is a valuable educational resource for designers and planners. Its architecture is characteristic of the Late Twentieth-Century Organic style.

The architecture of this library may contribute to the education of designers in their understanding of Late Twentieth-Century Architectural Styles by locating the building in its historical and environmental contexts and placing it within the knowledge domain of architectural, urban and environmental histories. This building is a very good example of the style. Its innovative planning contributes to its significance and educational heritage. .

The Dickson Library can be compared with the Giralang School and Health Centre that has, in principle, a similar cruciform plan. Both buildings have in common the display of free massing and design features typical of the style: the way the complex angular geometry complements nature, the use of horizontal roof plains, and strong horizontal fascias. The parkland setting of the School and Health Centre can be contrasted with the urban setting of the Library.

References

Other Information Sources