

JAMES BIRRELL (1928 – 2019)



Centenary Pool, Brisbane [built 1959], 1960. Photograph by Donald Finlay. [Image no. \(R115\) lbp00211](#)

James Birrell was born in Victoria in 1928, graduating from Melbourne University with an architecture degree in 1951. After graduation he worked in Canberra for the Commonwealth Department of Works where his lifelong fascination with Water Burley Griffin and Marion Mahony Griffin began. Birrell became known as the man who found the long lost Canberra drawings of the Griffins, lying on the floor of an old army hut in the Canberra suburb of Riverside. He had been investigating the archives of the National Capital Authority in his spare time.

A brief stint in Darwin followed, overseeing the reconstruction of infrastructure destroyed during the Japanese bombings in the Second World War, then in 1955 at the age of 27, Birrell was appointed Brisbane City Council Architect and went on to oversee an extensive range of public building projects including libraries, car parks and even toilet blocks, over the next six years. While most buildings have been demolished in the intervening years his modernist classic, Centenary Pool, still exists at Spring Hill as does another major work, the Wickham Street carpark. Both are now heritage listed.

In 1961, Birrell was appointed the University of Queensland's Staff Architect. Here he designed arguably his best work including Union College, J.D. Story administration building and Hartley Teakle building, formerly the Agriculture and Entomology building. During this time he undertook research into the life and career of Walter Burley Griffin, releasing a pioneering biography of the architect of the national capital in 1964.

From the late 1960s Birrell went into private practice in Queensland and New Guinea, where he assisted an Australian university program to establish a university in Port Moresby. In the late 1960s he designed the campus plan for James Cook University in Townsville and several of its early buildings, including the library which is now known as the Eddie Koiki Mabo Library. Birrell also acted as a planning consultant to the Indonesian government.

In 2005 James Birrell was awarded the Australian Institute of Architects' highest honour, the Gold Medal for his "spirited and distinguished contribution to the discipline of architecture through his built work, through his publications and through his service to the profession and the wider community". Birrell passed away in 2019.



Wickham Terrace car park in Spring Hill, Brisbane [built 1959-60], 1978. Photograph by Colin Aggett. [Image no. 32061-0042-0001](#)

Collection resources (architectural plans and papers)

- [27313 James Peter Birrell papers 1952-1985](#)
A collection of photographs, newspaper clippings, correspondence and personal records related to the life and career of James Birrell.
- [28199 James Peter Birrell photographs 1957-1961](#)
A collection of four albums of photographs of projects undertaken by Birrell during the period of his employment as Brisbane City Council Architect.
- [28481 James Birrell architectural plans 1939-2000](#)
An extensive collection of approximately 1,000 architectural plans produced by James Birrell in the years of his private practice, working on projects in North Queensland, Papua New Guinea and the Sunshine Coast.
- [28520 James Birrell papers 1972-1994](#)
This collection consists of a mixture of general office business, letters to clients regarding projects and job or project proposals. It represents an important element of the professional life of James Birrell.
- [31504 James Birrell architectural plans, photographs and personal papers](#)
Architectural plans, photographs, personal and business papers related to the career of James Birrell and comprising material from his career in Queensland, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia.

Collection resources (videos)

- [James Birrell oral history](#), 2012
This oral history, consisting of two parts, features James Birrell discussing his life and career from his early architectural training to his work at Brisbane City Council and the University of Queensland.
- [Wickham Terrace car park with Russell Hall digital story](#), 2014
This digital story, produced to accompany State Library's exhibition *Hot Modernism*, features architect Russell Hall discussing James Birrell's design of the Wickham Terrace car park, built in 1959-1960 when he was Brisbane City Council's Chief Architect.



University College of Townsville Library in Townsville, Queensland [now known as Eddie Koiki Mabo Library at James Cook University, built in 1968], c.1968. Photograph by Beverly Studio. [Image no. 6523-0001-0413](#)