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## **Edgewater Towers 12 Marine Parade, St Kilda**

Over some two hundred years, the Johnson family have for six generations been involved in the building industry: as carpenter, builders, engineer, but no less than four as architects. Probably George Raymond Johnson (1840-1898) architect is the best known. I'm not aware of another such dynasty in Melbourne, although two generations in the one family does occur, one thinks of the Lewis's, Lyons's, Boyd's, Grounds's, Stoughton's three generations of McIntyres and of the Bates, Smart and McCutcheon families within Bates Smart, Architects.

George was the son of William, journeyman (employee) carpenter and builder from Marston-on-Dove, Derbyshire. He was articled to George Hall, architect to the Midland Railway Co. He practised briefly in London before immigrating to Queensland in 1862. He worked as surveyor and builder as Godfrey & Johnson (1863-64), then came to Melbourne in 1867. He was soon a successful architect here, designer of three groups of almshouses, including: the Jewish, at 619 St Kilda Road, St Kilda (1869, **47**) and the Old Colonist Homes for George Coppin, the famous theatrical entrepreneur, at North Fitzroy (1870) and then fifteen theatres, including the Prince of Wales Opera House (1872), the Theatre Royal, Adelaide (1877), the Bijou, Bourke Street (1889), all now demolished and the Theatre Royal, Perth (1897) as well as many shops and hotels.

But George Johnson's greatest works are splendid town halls: Hotham (North Melbourne, 1875), Daylesford (1882), Maryborough (1887), Fitzroy (1887), Collingwood (1885-90), Northcote (1888-90) and Kilmore (1893-95), as well as the Metropolitan Meat Market (1879-80 & 89), the 1888 extensions to the Royal Exhibition Building and the Hospital for Incurables (the Austin, 1881). The only surviving building known to me he designed in St Kilda, is the Daniel Tuomy house, owned by the artist Albert Tucker, later in his career, at 55 Blessington Street (**9**). George Johnson's practice collapsed in the 1892, losing all his assets in the subsequent financial crash. He left Melbourne for Perth with his architect second son, Harry M.G. Johnson (1867-1931).

Harry's son, Harry Raymond Johnson (1892-1954), known as Ray, returned with his parents to Melbourne and settled in Middle Park. He was articled as an architect to his father, then began practice in Milton Street, Elwood in 1915. During the 1920s, his practice blossomed, designing many country and suburban hotels including the still-intact Waterside Hotel, 508 Flinders Street (1925). His project for the Egyptian Art Deco of Richmond Town Hall (1935) was controversial and his largest built project. Ray was elected councillor for the City of St Kilda, West Ward (1931-40) and became Mayor (1932-33).

He probably effectively acted as honorary architect for the major additions to the Town Hall (1939, **33**).

He designed houses at 94 Milton Street, (1917) and 8 Broadway, Elwood (1919). Over 1915-28, he designed houses in Milton, Ruskin, and Addison Streets, Elwood.

In 1920, Ray Johnson was architect for Yurnga Flats, 36 Brighton Road, Balaclava, then for conversion of 28-36 Alma Road, St Kilda (1925) into flats in a stripped, Mediterranean manner. Numerous blocks of flats in Elwood and St Kilda, followed. Before World War II, these included Marlo Flats, 30 Mitford Street (c1929), the stylish Streamlined Moderne of Casa Milano, and 20 Grey Street, facing Jackson Street, (c1933) and Oslo Guest House additions, 32-46 Grey Street (1936). Ray was also the designer for the Scoota Boat Building at Little Luna Park (1934), which I so enjoyed as a kid.

After World War II, Ray's office was joined by Mordecai Benshemesh. Over the next four years Benshemesh was responsible for the firm's design. They were very prolific. In 1946, the office produced two blocks of flats at 42 & 44 Southey Street, acting like sentinels on either side of Southey Court, and Rajon flats at 3 Tennyson Street. There are similar flats in Mitford Street, Barkly Street, Ormond Road and three blocks in Hotham Street near Cardigan Street. Their architectural style can be described as late Streamlined Moderne transitional to International Modernist. There are pressed cream bricks, corner steel-framed windows, the stair expressed as a vertical element, with full-height glazing and cantilevered round cornered balconies, with solid brick balustrades. The lines are very clean and planar, and the massing boldly expressed.

Questa Heights at 21 The Esplanade (cnr Robe Street) is transitional in style to Benshemesh's next phase (although it is uncertain whether it was built before or after Edgewater Towers). On Johnson's retirement in 1948, Benshemesh left to establish his own practice. His son, Raymond Milton Johnson (1925-), unable to enter the architecture course at Melbourne University due to its closure for the duration of World War II, became a structural engineer. He was designer of many large aviation and brewing projects around Australia. He was also the designer of the alterations to the Victory Cinema in 1974 for its conversion and use by the National Theatre (**3**). But Raymond Milton's son, Peter Raymond Johnson, is currently a practicing architect in St Kilda. (**15**).

In C.J. Koch's novel, *Across the Sea Wall* (1965), the hero returns to Melbourne from the fastness of Sydney and revisits Marine Parade, which he says 'runs in my blood'.

Children ran on dry, prickly grass by the sea wall; palms and a forgotten rotunda sulked against grey water; ice cream papers skittered through the afternoon, which wore on with sweet tedium. Across Marine Parade, a line of residential waited in unnatural silence: little stucco turrets surmounted by urns, front doors glinting with leadlight glass. Strange Edwardian circus; survival from another civilisation, peeling and persisting in the sun, here in India; abandoned backdrop, waiting vainly for some marvellous action to start in front of it.

Edgewater Towers, a hundred single and two-bedroom apartments, each with a fabulous view across the bay, sprang up from Marine Parade to Mordecai Benshemesh's 1959-60 design of pure modernism. One of Melbourne's earliest, large-scale privately developed apartment blocks, a glistening, white slab, stark against the setting sun. *The Age* extolled it as 'everything you'd find in a Manhattan building, only minutes from Collins Street, although to Phillip Goad, it is more 1950s Miami Beach. I prefer *The Age's* view.

The owner (or body corporate vehicle) was Edgewater Towers Pty. Ltd. It was the first apartment development on this scale on the bay and the apartments were accessed by express lifts. In the days before the Strata Titles Act (1967), the apartments were stratum-titled. At ground level were shops and offices. Throughout the 1960s there were numerous St Kilda Council building approvals to enclose the balconies.



Edgewater Towers, 2002

In South Yarra, Robin Boyd's (46), controversially intrusive Domain Park Tower flats, 193 Domain Road, South Yarra (1960-62), followed the precedent of Edgewater Towers. Here, no balconies were permitted to be enclosed.

In St Kilda, at 333 Beaconsfield Parade (1963-70), Sol Sapir's sixteen-storied design in brown brick and white precast concrete spandrel panels, is not quite in the same class as either of these, but one of a scatter that emerged across the inner eastern suburbs, with Sapir as both architect and developer, including 189 Beaconsfield Parade and Hobsons Bay Tower. Later in 1963-64, Benshemesh designed the Palm Lake Motel, at 52 Queens Road.

Of the involuntary emigration of avant garde architects from Vienna in the late 1930s, many came to Australia and with the singular exception of Harry Seidler, to Melbourne. With Seidler, the best known are Dr Ernest Leslie Fooks, Fritz Janeba and Kurt Popper. With Benshemesh, other architect *émigrés* included Bernard Slawick, Anatol Kagan and Herbert Tisher. They furthered the work of an earlier generation of flat-designing Jewish architects in 1930s St Kilda, including Levy and Plottel (41).

Two other designers of flats in post-war Melbourne, several of which are in St Kilda, were Kurt Popper and Dr Ernest Leslie Fooks (1906-88). Fook's complex and rich career has been detailed in Prof. Edquist's essay and exhibition catalogue. Born in Bratislava, in former Czechoslovakia, he grew up in Vienna. He obtained a master's degree in architecture and a doctorate, majoring in town planning. As an asylum-seeker, he was granted a residence permit by Australia and obtained a position as a town planner with the recently created Housing Commission of Victoria, in 1939.

Like most European-trained architects (including in a later generation, although trained here, Nonda Katsalidis, (11)), Fooks saw apartment living as necessary to successful urban life. He published his approach in *X-Ray the City, The Density Diagram, Basis for Urban Planning* (1946), with a foreword by H.C. (Nugget) Coombs, who was then Director-General, Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction. In this work, Fooks was the first to discuss the issues arising from what the present government has now attempted to address, in its *ResCode* legislation, some 55 years later. He became the first lecturer in the new discipline of town planning at Melbourne Technical College (later RMIT University). He exhibited his own paintings and drawings.

Then, in 1948, Fooks established his own practice. In the thirty years from 1950, Fooks designed over forty blocks of flats in St Kilda, Caulfield, Toorak, South Yarra and Hawthorn. Prof. Edquist considers his Park View flats, 5 Herbert Street, St Kilda (1959), one of the best examples, 'beautifully sited facing St Kilda gardens', possibly influenced by the Frederick Romberg (another Jewish European-trained *émigré* architect), Newburn flats, Queens Road (1939, 42), which are just outside the City of St Kilda, as well as Scandinavian designs. Ernest Fooks' office was at 1 Woonsocket Court, St Kilda (1955-57).

Park View Flats required demolition of a very fine Gothic Revival villa. This was designed by George R. Johnson in 1868 for John Nicholson, son of the Victorian premier William Nicholson (24). The value of architectural heritage was less understood in 1959, when the National Trust had only existed for four years. His St Kilda flats include: 90 Barkly Street (1956), 162 Brighton Road (1956), B'nai B'rith Lodge, 99 Hotham Street (1957), Ruskin Street (cnr Shelley Street), Elwood (1958), 16 Cardigan Street, East St Kilda (1959), nine flats in Carlisle Street (1950s) and 394 Inkerman Street (1960). There are several single-family houses, extensions to Elwood High School (1981), buildings for the Jewish community and the Alfred Square Car Park (1961).

Kurt Popper was born in Vienna in 1910. He was also trained in the tradition of severe Viennese Modernism and arrived in Adelaide in 1939. By 1945, he was working with

Fooks at the Housing Commission of Victoria, but founded his own practice the next year in Jolimont. Most of his work is domestic: 70 blocks of flats and 60 houses, in the 1960s he was one of Melbourne's most prolific flat designers; and of Jewish community buildings. Later he designed the first major apartment blocks in the city: Park Tower, Spring Street (1968); 15 Collins Street (1969) and Chateau Commodore, Lonsdale Street, (1970).

In St Kilda, Prof. Harriet Edquist's study has identified 14 blocks of Popper's flats built between 1949 and 1970: in Tennyson Street, Chapel Street (2), Mitford Street (3 blocks), Alma Road (cnr Westbury Street), Dickens Street, Acland Street, Inkerman Street, Alexander Street, Hughendon Road, Beaconsfield Parade and Kipling Street (2 blocks). There is only one house, in Goatlands Street and he also designed the Elwood Synagogue, Moriah College and Kindergarten, Dickens Street (1956 and 1973). Other groups are just outside the area, in Gordon Street and Hotham Street.

After over 45 years of uninterrupted flat-building, St Kilda took a breather. Virtually no flats appear to have been built in St Kilda after the Sapir towers, for the next thirty years, (11).

In 1982, the first of St Kilda's four heritage studies was completed and a very limited number of buildings came to be protected in the council's planning scheme for their heritage value. At last the National Trust was not alone in fighting to preserve the mansions and more modest significant buildings, such as prefabricated houses (25), which had been frequently sacrificed to provide cleared sites for flats.

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**Note:** The City of St Kilda Building Permit Register has been lost. So it is not confirmed that Questa Heights was actually designed by Benshemesh, but Peter Johnson notes that so many of the concrete details are similar. For the same reason its dating either before or after Edgewater Towers cannot be yet confirmed.

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Peter Johnson. Much additional material, particularly regarding his family.