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Edgewater Towers,
12 Marine Parade,
St Kilda

Over two hundred years and six generations, the Johnson family have for been involved in the building industry: as a carpenter, builders, an engineer and no less than four architects, of whom George Raymond Johnson (1840-1898) architect and surveyor is probably 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', Boyds, Grounds', Godsells (Father and 2 sons), Staughtons, of the Bates, Smart and the McCutcheon families within Bates Smart, Architects; and three generations of both the McIntyre and Perrot/Lyons families.

George R Johnson was born at Southgate, North London, the son of William, journeyman (employee) carpenter and building contractor from Marston-on-Dove, Derbyshire. He was articled to George Hall, at Derby, architect to the Midland Railway Company and his first major Melbourne building, Metropolitan the Meat Market has a particularly fine arched timber roof reminiscent of roofs of English railway station sheds, as are to a lesser extent its fine arched entry portals in Blackwood and Courtney Streets.

After practising briefly in London, in 1862 he immigrated to Brisbane where he worked as surveyor and builder as Godfrey & Johnson (1863-64), he came to Melbourne in 1867 and was soon a successful architect here, possibly obtaining clients through the Masonic Lodge. He designed three groups of almshouses, including the Jewish Almshouses at 619 St Kilda Road, St Kilda (1869, **46)** now demolished and the new buildings renamed the Montefiore Homes and the Old Colonist Homes (1870) for George Coppin, the famous theatrical entrepreneur, at North Fitzroy, and then fifteen theatres, including the Prince of Wales Opera House (1872), the Theatre Royal, Adelaide (1877) and the Bijou, Bourke Street (1889), all now demolished, except the gloriously surviving Theatre Royal, Perth (1897).

Other than the Meat Market, George Johnson's greatest works are splendid town halls: Hotham (North Melbourne, 1875), Daylesford (1882), Maryborough (1887), Fitzroy (1887 doubling the size of W J Ellis's 1873 hall and retaining its tower at the rear), Collingwood (1885-90), Northcote (1888-90) and Kilmore (1893-95), as well as the Eastern Arcade, Bourke Street (1872), the Metropolitan Meat Market (1874, 1879-80 and 1889), the 1888 extensions to the Royal Exhibition Building and the Hospital for Incurables, Heidelberg (the Austin Hospital, 1881) as well as many shops and hotels.

The only surviving building he is known to have designed in St Kilda is early, the Daniel Tuomy house, owned by the artist Albert Tucker, at 55 Blessington Street (1860, **9**). He was a Hawthorn Borough Councillor from 1870-73. George Johnson's practice collapsed in the 1892 financial crash and he lost all his assets. He left Melbourne for Perth with his architect second son, Harry M G Johnson (1867-1931) and he died at sea, whilst returning to Melbourne, leaving an estate of £150.

Harry's son, Harry Raymond Johnson (1892-1954) known as Ray, returned with his parents to Melbourne and settled in Middle Park. He served his articles with his father, and then began architectural practice in Milton Street, Elwood in 1915. During the 1920s, his practice blossomed and he designed many country and suburban hotels including the still-intact Waterside Hotel, 508 Flinders Street (1925). His project for re-fronting the dignified, but modestly polychromatic Italianate Richmond Town Hall with Egyptian Art

Deco in 1935, was controversial and his largest built project. Ray was elected councillor for the City of St Kilda (1931-40), became mayor (1932-33) and 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) and over 1915-28, he designed further houses in Milton, Ruskin and Addison Streets, Elwood.

In 1920, Ray Johnson was architect for Yurnga Flats, 36 Brighton Road, Balaclava, then for the conversion of 28-36 Alma Road, St Kilda (1925) into flats in a stripped, Mediterranean manner and numerous blocks of flats in Elwood and St Kilda, followed. Before World War II, these included: Marlo Flats, 30 Mitford Street (c1929), the stylishly Streamlined Moderne of Casa Milano and 20 Grey Street, facing Jackson Street (c1933) and additions to the Oslo Guest House, 32-46 Grey Street (1936). Ray also designed the Scoota Boat Building at Little Luna Park (1934, **4**), which I so enjoyed as a kid.

After World War II, Mordecai Benshemesh joined Ray's office and over the next very prolific four years was responsible for the firm's design. In 1946, the office produced two blocks of flats at 42 and 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, in pressed cream bricks, steel-framed corner windows, the stair expressed as a vertical element, with full-height glazing and cantilevered round cornered balconies with brick balustrades. Their lines are very clean and planar and the massing boldly expressed.

Questa Heights at 21 The Esplanade (cnr Robe Street) appears as 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. Ray's 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, designer of many large aviation and brewing projects around Australia and in 1974 he converted the Victory Cinema for use by the National Theatre (**3**). 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, in words reminiscent of Sir Sidney Nolan's (**1**), '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 residentials 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.

From this setting, rises Edgewater Towers, a hundred single and two-bedroom apartments, each with a fabulous view across the bay, springing up from Marine Parade to Mordecai Benshemesh's 1959-60 design of pure modernism. It is Melbourne's earliest, large-scale privately developed apartment block, a glistening, white slab, stark against the setting sun.

The original sales brochure for Edgewater Towers reveals that the developer was Bruce Small Enterprises. Small was the founder of the famous Malvern Star Bicycle Company and apparently, he and his friend Hubert ('Oppie') Openheim, the champion Olympic cyclist had apartments in the building. The brochure extols 'Melbourne's finest home and investment project' as 'Fabulous apartment living comes to Melbourne.' A perspective image depicts the building as more interestingly modelled than it now is, without the later blandly infilled balconies. *The Age* extolled it as 'everything you'd find in a Manhattan building, only minutes from Collins Street, although to Professor Phillip Goad, it is more like 1950s Miami Beach. I prefer *The Age's* view.

The architectural working drawings for 100 flats, over 13 stories are dated 6 May 1960, and the planning permit was issued to M Benshemesh & Associates, of 115 Domain Road, South Yarra, on 24 May 1962. Later, a restaurant was inserted into the ground floor, for the convenience of the occupants.

The owner (or body corporate vehicle) was Edgewater Towers Pty Ltd and in those days before the Strata Titles Act (1967), the apartments were stratum-titled. It was the first apartment development on this scale on the bay and the apartments were accessed by express lifts and at ground level were shops and offices. Unfortunately but perhaps understandably due to its exposure, in the 1960s there were numerous St Kilda Council building approvals issued to enclose the balconies. In Domain Road South Yarra, Robin Boyd's (**3, 7**, **36**, **41** & **47**), controversially intrusive Domain Park Tower flats, 193 Domain Road, South Yarra (1960-62), followed the precedent of Edgewater Towers, but enclosing the balconies there was not permitted. Later in 1963-64, Benshemesh designed the Palm Lake Motel, at 52 Queens Road.

In St Kilda, Sol Sapir's sixteen-storied design at 333 Beaconsfield Parade (1963-70) in brown brick and white precast concrete spandrel panels is not quite in the same class as Edgewater or Domain, but was one of a scatter of his flats that emerged across the inner eastern suburbs, with Sapir as both architect and developer, including Bayview Heights, 13 The Esplanade, cnr Victoria Street, the earliest; 3 Alfred Square, cnr Wimmera Place; 189 Beaconsfield Parade and the Hobsons Bay Tower.

Flat 92 in Sapir's Bayview Heights is St Kilda's only whole-floor penthouse. It was renovated in 2005 and it's 400 m^2 has 'uninterrupted views to the Dandenongs,' is 'much, much bigger than Hawthorn's Shane Crawford's two-bedroom St Kilda penthouse' which peripatetic Sam Newman (**22**) moved on to in September 2009. It has four bathrooms, three living rooms, yet unfortunately only two car spaces. Perhaps tram rides will still be on the cards when its new owner shells out some $2.4 million.

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 (all **32**). With Benshemesh, other architect *émigrés* included Frederick Romberg, Bernard Slawick, Anatol Kagan and Herbert Tisher (all **32**). They furthered the work of an earlier generation of flat-designing Jewish architects in 1930s St Kilda, including Levy and Plottel (**32** & **41**).



Edgewater Towers, 2002

Two other designers of flats in post-war Melbourne, several of which are in St Kilda, were Kurt Popper (**32**). and Dr Ernest Leslie Fooks (1906-88, **32**), whose complex and rich career has been detailed in Professor 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, then a doctorate, majoring in town planning. In 1939, as an asylum-seeker, he was granted an Australian residence permit and secured a position as town planner with the recently created Housing Commission of Victoria.

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 of the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction. Here Fooks was the first to discuss the issues arising from what the present state 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 (now RMIT University) and exhibited his paintings and drawings.

Then in 1948, Fooks established his own practice and in the thirty years from 1950, he designed over forty blocks of flats in St Kilda, Caulfield, Toorak, South Yarra and Hawthorn. Professor Edquist considers his Park View flats, 5 Herbert Street, St Kilda (1959), to be one of the best examples, 'beautifully sited facing St Kilda gardens,' possibly influenced by the Frederick Romberg's (another Jewish European-trained *émigré* architect) Newburn flats, 30 Queens Road (1939, **42**) just outside the City of Port Phillip as well as Scandinavian design. Fooks' also designed his own office at 1 Woonsocket Court, St Kilda (1955-57) and also his own house, at 32 Howitt Street, Caulfield North ().

Park View Flats required demolition of a very fine Gothic Revival villa, which George R Johnson had designed in 1868 for John Nicholson, son of the Victorian premier William Nicholson (**24**). The value of conserving architectural heritage was less understood in 1959, when the National Trust had only existed for

three years. Fooks' other St Kilda flats include: 90 Barkly Street and 162 Brighton Road (both 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 Modernism and arrived in Adelaide in 1939. By 1945, he was working with Fooks at the Housing Commission of Victoria, but he founded his own practice the next year in Jolimont. Most of his work is domestic: including 70 blocks of flats and 60 houses. In the 1960s he was one of Melbourne's most prolific designers of flats and Jewish community buildings. Later he designed the first major apartment blocks in the city: Park Tower, Spring Street (1968); 15 Collins Street (1969) and the Chateau Commodore, Lonsdale Street (1970), the only city flats until Nonda Katsalidis' Melbourne Terrace (**11**) 24 years later.

Professor Harriet Edquist's study has identified 14 blocks of Popper's flats built in St Kilda between 1949 and 1970: three blocks in Mitford Street, two blocks each in Chapel Street and Kipling Street, Alma Road (corner Westbury Street), in Tennyson Street, Dickens Street, Acland Street, Inkerman Street, Alexander Street, Hughendon Road and Beaconsfield Parade. Popper designed only one house, in Goatlands Street and he also designed the Elwood Synagogue, Moriah College and a kindergarten in Dickens Street (1956 and 1973). Other flats are just outside the area, in Gordon Street and Hotham Street.

After over 45 years of uninterrupted flat-building, St Kilda took a breather and no flats appear to have been built in St Kilda after the Sapir towers in 1970 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 received cautious protection for their heritage value in the council's planning scheme. 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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15

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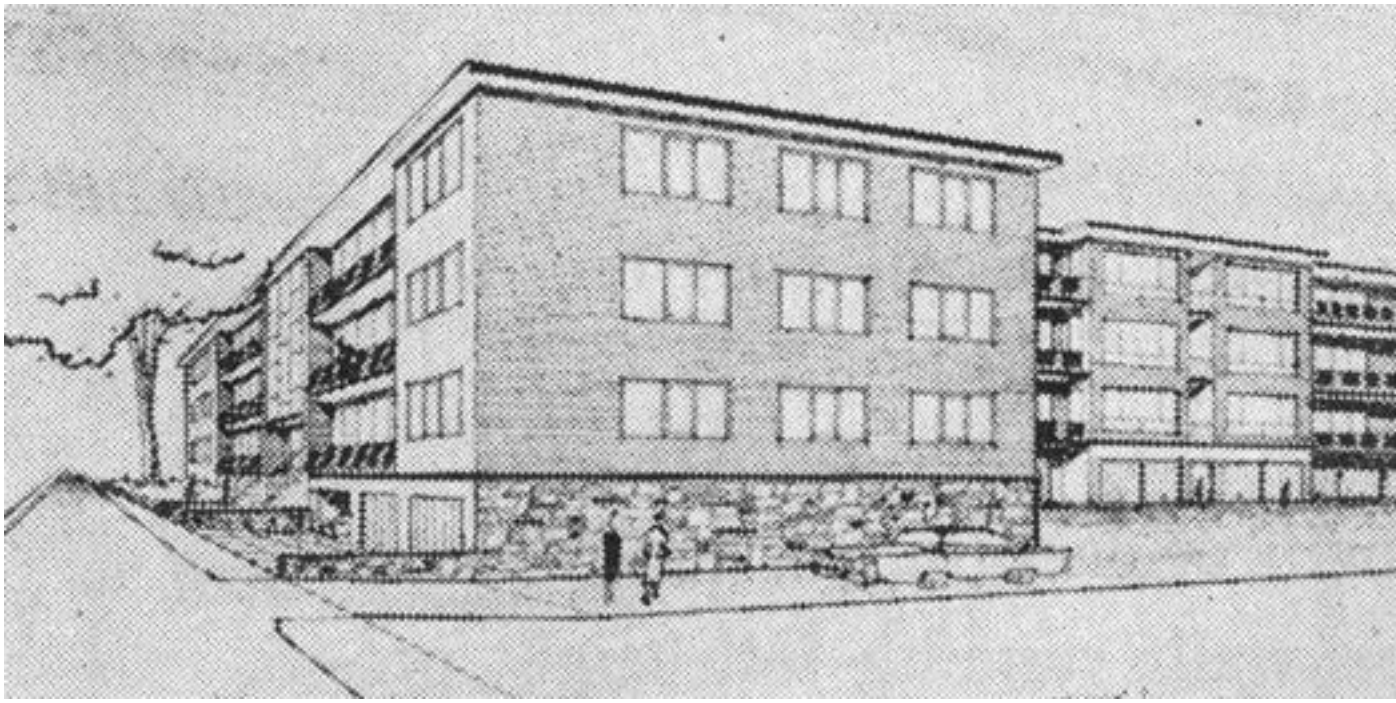
react-text: 46 Remove /react-text

react-text: 52 Simon Reeves /react-text react-text: 55 /react-text Nice flats! I immediately detected an emigre modernist's hand. My first thought was either Benshemesh or Fooks... each did a lot of stuff in this area. But a little delving confirms that these flats were actually the work of Austrian-born Kurt Popper... he was also responsible for the ones on the other side of the gallery, at 26a Acland Street. Both blocks date from 1960.



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

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