

# Union College, University of Queensland

Revised date 27/05/2011

Address University of Queensland, St Lucia, Brisbane Qld

Practice Stage 1 James Birrell (University Architect).

Stages 2-5 James Birrell & Partners.

Designed 1963 Completed 1972

History &  
Description

Located along Upland Road in the south west of the university campus, just to the north of the No. 2 University sports oval, the elevated three-storey dormitory building of Union College extends in a segmented lineal configuration, in the form of a mirrored question mark. Below & alongside is the slightly faceted lineal form of the communal facilities building which extends under the dormitories at the mid-point. Built in five stages to accommodate 341 students it was a departure in several ways from student accommodation of the early 1960s. Named after the Student Union which established the college it was not affiliated with a church or denomination. It was designed to provide informal student accommodation, at first for males only, & then in 1968, with the completion of Stage 3, as the first college in Queensland to accommodate both male & female students. The plan realized three important requirements; it formed irregular shaped courtyards to retained the existing mature site trees; it limited the amount of site works by elevating the dormitories above the exiting ground level, & it took advantage of the views toward the oval & river beyond & cross-flow ventilation of the cooling river breezes. The single storey facilities building & warden's residence, below Block F, were built in Stage 2 & placed on ground, with service entry from the north. The 4th Stage included units for married tutors & tutorial rooms & the final stage completed the dormitories.

The repetitive three levels of accommodation are supported above insitu-concrete deep beams & blade columns along the line of the 'stacked' rooms with internal load bearing dividing walls of dark manganese brick. The façades are banded with off-form insitu-concrete walls above & below full width plain anodized aluminium framed glazing. Each room originally had one large 'train carriage' full width pivoting window of double glazing containing venetian blinds. Many of the original windows have since been replaced with triple hopper-windows. Narrow Western Red Cedar infill panels cover the internal brick wall ends where they intersect with the façade glazing. Open stairwells with off-form concrete balustrades are placed at regular intervals along the building. The facilities block is clad in Mt Coot-tha bluestone between concrete portals frames. The structure providing column-free open-planned interiors with parquet floors, ceilings lined with compacted strawboard & a brick fireplace with four arches over the central hearth. The joinery is in Australian Blackbean timber. Random rubble bluestone retaining walls extend throughout the site. The overall outward appearance is unadorned & vigorous with the off-form concrete, stone, timber, & aluminium all chosen to weather to soft tones of grey with contrasts in texture. Union College was awarded a High Commendation by the Arts & Architecture journal as one of the best ten new buildings in Australia at that time.

Birrell first worked for the Commonwealth Works Department, in Melbourne then Canberra, Darwin & finally to Brisbane. In 1955 he was appointed Chief Architect of the Brisbane City Council Architectural Department. From 1961 until 1966 he was the University of Queensland Staff Architect. James Birrell was awarded the RAI Gold Medal in 2005.

Statement of  
Significance

The Union College is a significant example of a building that demonstrates a theme of modern architecture with narrow, linear planning to facilitate cross-ventilation, primary storeys raised clear of the ground, large areas of adjustable glazing to maximise ventilation, extensive areas of off-form concrete walls combined with an expressed structural frame by one of Australia's notable architects. The architecture combined with the natural setting where the existing trees were retained was an innovative approach at that time in Australia.

Criteria  
Applicable

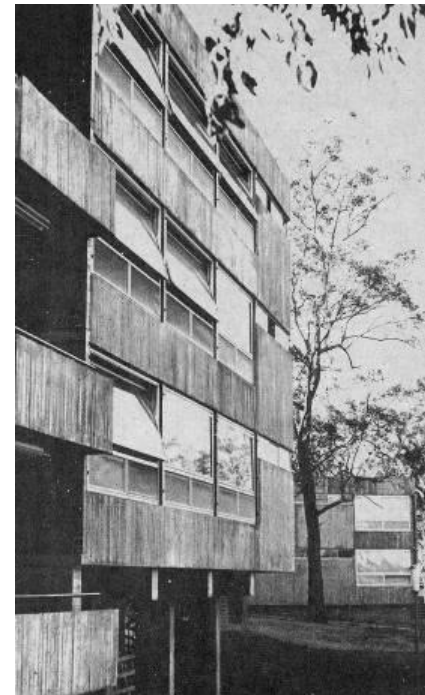
**N2** – Exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.

**N3** – Establishing a high degree of creative achievement.

**N5** – Having a special association with the life or works of an architect of significant importance in our society.



Source: R Stringer





Photos: R Stringer (Birrell work), Scarab 1965;  
site plan (*Birrel work from the office*)