Interview with Geoffrey Borrack
conducted by teaching students of Australian Catholic University.
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Transcribed by Sylvia Black

We were told you were in architecture. Are you still in architecture?

Yes

In the East Melbourne area?

No, not entirely. Some of our work is still in East Melbourne but we do a lot of work interstate, not a lot, but we do some projects interstate and various parts around the Victorian countryside.

And what type of architecture?

Mostly residential

So you have done a lot of buildings in terms of residential in the East Melbourne area?

Yes, over the years. I came to East Melbourne, when was it? 1968 I guess. And I came here essentially to live. In the course of the first year I was asked to do some work on an old house, which I did. And that has developed into another and another and another, so that over the years I got a bit branded as someone who does work in East Melbourne. It wasn't exactly the work I was looking for but it certainly kept the wolf from the door, and so I ended up over the last number of years of doing about thirty projects, I think, in East Melbourne, on old buildings in various states of repair, and innovation once the planning laws were established by the Council we found we could add things on to buildings and get permits. It is a fairly rigorous regime these days. You can't really have a free go to do what you might have done in the '60s, because the laws have all been tightened.

So what type of permits?

Well, these are planning permits. Most of East Melbourne, or large sections of it are classified as heritage architecture areas now. And when I came to East Melbourne in 1968 there were not many laws in place to protect the important old buildings of East Melbourne so I found myself pretty heavily embroiled, I became pretty passionate, I suppose about maintaining a lot of the important old buildings in East Melbourne and they were largely under attack in those days by developers who saw an excellent opportunity to knock these buildings down and gain good land close to the city and create new buildings none of which had much real architectural merit any how. And so, you know, if you have a feeling for quality work which was built a hundred years ago, you don't really like seeing it wantonly destroyed. It depends how passionate you get about these things, but there were of course, a group of people here who felt similarly, who had moved to East Melbourne for the particular quality of the environment, the old buildings and all of that and we became a fairly vocal voice in

the community opposing new development that was going to wantonly destroy lots of buildings. And I found myself initially doing a very small building, in Simpson Street, down a laneway and nobody I don't think, even knew it existed. It was like a little old dog shed almost. And when I went down there it was a magical little place because this little lane opened up into a large courtyard and in there was this very simple little L-shaped house that had been built maybe in the 1880s, '60s, I think it was. It was almost completely collapsed. And in fact there was a demolition order placed on it by the Melbourne City Council. And I only became aware of it because the agents that were selling it sent prospective purchasers to me in the view that I might give them some inkling as to what they could do with this old building and when I saw it I became very passionate about it because it was a wonderful little remnant of the past and I would hate to see it destroyed. I rather wanted to see it restored. When people came here with all the demolition orders that had been served on it I would ask them what they wanted to do with this little house and as soon as they said to me, "We are going to knock it down and we are going to restructure a whole new building on this site." I would say, "That's interesting. Are you aware of the demolition orders on this house?" and they would say, "Yes." And I would say, "Well there are a lot of things here that you have to spend money on before you can start doing what you want to do." Anyway my whole purpose was to put them off the scent. And so one day a young lawyer came to see me, and he said, "I am absolutely magically drawn to this little house." And I said, "Well, what do you want to do with it?" Paul was his name, and he said "I want to restore it." And so I said, "Paul, I think that's a good idea." And I actually volunteered my services free almost at that point. Anyway he ended up buying it and because we felt at one about restoring old houses which was a wonderful thing for me because I was a young bloke trying to make his mark and I hadn't anticipated the authorities that give these awards would act as favourably as they did, but that was the result and I must say it was sold for a very handsome profit and it really put focus on the fact that these old buildings in East Melbourne that were being wantonly destroyed if brought back to a proper sense of structure and reality would offer wonderful accommodation for people and probably bring the owners a much more handsome profit than if they knocked it down and this of course has been proven over the years. Properties here have escalated. You would buy a property here in East Melbourne in the '60s for $20,000 which in those days was a lot of money, it doesn't sound much these days, those same properties now exceed a million dollars for just a bit of money spent. But you know what my purpose at that time was, I guess I was looking into the future a lot, and there were wealthy people who came in here to buy property and I would say to them, " You could make a lot of money if you do this, this .." and they'd look askance and say "Umm, I'm not sure about all that" and so the net result was that a lot of their plans and intentions when revealed showed that they were going to knock down some of the most important and prominent buildings in East Melbourne. And that's when I suppose we became a sort of moral army in some ways, and we did all sorts of nasty things. We called on the Builders' Labourers' Union to raid the sites if they were going to knock it down. Anything was fair play to stop demolition. You are probably not aware of what East Melbourne used to be like in the '60s but there were some fabulous buildings and we had wonderful schools here. We had the Presbyterian Ladies College, a wonderful sandstone building just up the hill. That was next to the old Christian Brothers School in Victoria Parade. It is still there. It is the only surviving school now in East Melbourne. There was Chalmers Hall, which was wonderful. It was the first Scotch College and it was where St. Andrew's Hospital

now is. Buildings of that calibre, pretty substantial buildings and there was the Eye and Ear Hospital. Now the Eye and Ear Hospital took up a whole section of Morrison Place. It was a complete architectural entity in as much as it extended up Morrison Place and around into Victoria Parade and when I got news that it was going to be partially demolished to make way for a new multi-storey doctors' headquarters I couldn't believe that this could occur when you took into account the heritage and the importance of the Morrison Place precinct. Not only that it was going to mask out a very substantial view of St. Patrick's Cathedral spire. Anyway we went into bat. And I guess I was the leader at that time of getting something done, and it was a pretty major undertaking because we had to deal with a fairly important body, namely the Eye and Ear Hospital who are very well funded. As a result of that I learned that they wanted to produce a particular type of building and my task was to set about showing that they could achieve it if they decided to erect it behind the façade of the old building in Morrison Place. And to that end we engaged some architectural students, who were terrific young guys, and we couldn't afford to pay them. We did all the design and all the figures and computations and we made a model and then we invited the hospital board, if you like, and the Lord Mayor of Melbourne was involved at that stage, and the architects themselves, who were a very reputable large firm of hospital architects. And they had a meeting at this very table. And the architects were, I must say, a bit overwhelmed, and very angry that an alternative to their scheme was being promoted and the hospital board were very angry because they said they weren't going to change their plans because they had already spent a lot of taxpayers' money to pay the architect. So the whole thing was being decided not on merit but on what sums of money had been paid out and that became another issue. And so we lost the case, and I must say, that in those days if one wanted to make a mark you had to engage more reputable, more well known architects and so we got one of Melbourne's most well known architects to support our cause. Fortunately he found out after I had made public press statements that he was supporting us, that his friend was the architect. And so he asked me to do a withdrawal. So at any rate life goes on. I think the best success we had in East Melbourne, well probably two really. There is a big house called Crathre House, which is a very, very big house up on the corner of Powlett Street and Gipps Street, and another house called Braemar which is in George Street. Now they are two of the most important houses in East Melbourne. Now Braemar was a good one because the guy who wanted to knock it down was a big developer and he had already done a lot of damage in East Melbourne and he asked me to be his architect and I said, "No." I couldn't do that, but I said, "I might be able to do something for you if you would undertake to preserve the house." I had this sudden brainwave that there was still a bit of land at the back of this house and there was an old brick building there. It wasn't an important building, really just an old brick shed that had been a stable in the past. So I said to this guy, "Now if I get you permission to build two units at the back of this house, would that compensate you to some degree for the sum of money you would have to spend on preserving the front house?" And he sort of looked at the sky, and he looked at me and he said, "Yes." And so I said, "oh, OK." And I suddenly found myself in a position where I suddenly had to front up to the government with some sort of scheme. And I was able to make quite good headway, because the government at that stage, it was a liberal government, were very keen to make their mark on preserving old buildings – you know, a good bit of policy to pursue. And so they saw it as great benefit to them if they could do it. And of course they could, so they simply signed a statement saying that for the first time this gentleman could construct two buildings on a site that was

essentially a single house dwelling place. And you couldn't do that until then. It was just not allowed. So as a net result we did it and my client agreed to spend whatever needed to be spent on Braemar, which was the name of the house. If you ever go up that way you should have a look. It is a very interesting house and it sold recently for many millions of dollars. And when Mr. (I won't mention his name) asked me to do it it was worth about $280,000 and we are talking about the 1975-76 period. Just shows you how things can escalate. It was a great thing because now that building is established and will be there, hopefully, for ever. It was a bluestone building. And when you get a win like that it makes up for a lot of losses. And that was what we were really on about in those days, here in East Melbourne, You know I guess I could claim to have saved a few buildings but, gosh, we have lost a lot, beautiful buildings have gone. Next to the hospital site I could mention many buildings which have just disappeared and become public car parks. There was a great intention at the time to do so but nothing ever happened. The hospitals were always a bit of a menace. They were always desperately seeking extra space, and quite rightly, it was a legitimate cause but as time proved it was not a good place to have hospital expansion in a heritage part of Melbourne, like East Melbourne. So their limitations were so great that of course the Mercy has now moved out to Heidelberg where they have a huge establishment. And that particular building they had is now being converted into luxury apartments which are selling, I think, in the vicinity of three and four million dollars upwards. So life goes on.

So what type of heritage is in this area. What are the restrictions?

Well, the type of heritage here goes back…I think the earliest house here is in the realm of the 1850s. And there are various stages of architecture. There's the Georgian style of architecture which came in the 1850s which is very easily identified by the symmetry of windows and the proportion of windows – very pretty, relaxing buildings to look at. And then after that there was the land boom period which was a result of the gold rush, and many merchants and businessmen and politicians moved into East Melbourne as a desirable place to live and they created buildings with a lot more detail and ostentation. A lot of the iron work became much more detailed and worked and so this became the traditional Victorian architecture of East Melbourne. Once the 1900s started we went into another style of architecture which brought in red brick, and you will see lots of buildings around East Melbourne that are built in that particular vernacular. So there are about three basic types of residential buildings and they all have merit of course and the thing about them of course is the plan. And this is a typical one here. This house here, there are four of them, were built by a man who bought the big property four doors up from me, and he did this as a development for, I guess, impoverished workers, I don't know. But the point about it is that it illustrates the typical plan which is an L-shape. The Victorians really understood light. That was one of their great abilities. They didn't have big spaces to work with but by doing a dog-leg or L-shape plan they could introduce light into the side here, and the little bit that goes onto the back they could get light in there and they could create a visual courtyard close to the front of the house. And even now when you work on these houses I am just amazed at the flexibility that they allow for internal redevelopment without essentially changing the condition or value of the design. Their simplicity of the traditional plans allows for this. If they were complicated plans it would be too expensive, you couldn't do it. But the spaces themselves are very simple. I guess the main feature of these houses is that is probably best in terms

of modern day living, to have the rear of the house facing north because nowadays people like to escape to a quiet zone and they like that quiet zone to have sun, but if you are on the south side in East Melbourne you get shade and shadow and this is an appealing thing. The Victorians didn't worry too much about sun but now, of course, we love it and we try to introduce it wherever we can. Well, there are just a few facts about the old buildings They were all built on bluestone bases. And I must say that the strength of the foundations allows extra floors to be put on without strengthening. Bluestone a wonderful material and of course Victorian brick, but like a lot of things old buildings start to rot away and decay and I think one of the dangers doing work here in this part of town is that people get a bit overwhelmed by what they can achieve internally. They can do wonderful bathrooms and kitchens, and a lot of them tend to neglect what is happening under the ground and so we find that dampness is often a major cause of huge deterioration and to fix dampness in a house you have to do quite extensive work and of course you don't see any benefit for it. People like to see benefit for what they are spending. And the net result is that I think there are quite a few houses in East Melbourne which are in a very unhappy state of decay and people probably won't do much about it until one day they will get a major shock when the building cracks. I don't think I will be around to see it.

So what kind of work…you obviously do more restoring..

No, not really. A lot of work I have done on these old buildings is restoration…yes.

So if you were to restore what do you look to do? Can you change everything in the house?

Well, it depends. We are not allowed to change anything on the outside, number one. We must maintain the original look of the house, that's important, and secondly if you do extra building it has to be very respectful of the environment now, which means you can't shade other existing buildings next door. You can't detract by putting an unpleasant wall up that is visually unpleasant. You have got to …You certainly not allowed to create over-looking into the adjoining place….you can see how close we are here. So there are very strict laws on where windows go and what degree of amenity they preserve in regard to adjoining owners. That is often a very difficult thing to do, and a lot of plans and hopes that people have are dashed by the fact that their proposals can't be met in terms of planning legislation. So a lot of our time is spent in trying to work devious ways of achieving something beneficial and still be respectful of the neighbours. And that is very time consuming stuff. But it has always been that, and it is a jolly good thing. I mean in the past we have done additions to houses but have always set them well back from the façade so that they are not even visible from the street, and they maintain a sense of proportion. So it is not just a matter of going in and creating something. You have got to be very, very careful. But I find it interesting because while the houses all have similar plans there seem to be endless variations that you can achieve, I mean – everybody is different. And the nice thing is that one person's ideas are different from the rest, so that affects the way the house evolves and the design evolves. So it is an engaging thing, and it is a form of building, and I think you do learn gradually, a few tricks along the way. I would prefer to work on new stuff, new houses.

We are very fortunate to have worked in areas with beautiful landscape mainly in the countryside, and I find that hugely invigorating to be able to go into the open landscape and be asked to design something there and you suddenly realize that it is a huge responsibility to put anything into the landscape. There is that landscape which is pristine and original and you often think do you have a right to put something here and change this landscape for ever, or should it just stay as it is, and so the sense of responsibility is very big when you are asked to do that. We are doing one in Bermagui, which is on the New South Wales coast. That site is probably one of the most magnificent. It looks out over the Pacific Ocean and it is surrounded on all sides by water estuaries. It is something special. To be asked to design something in that landscape is confronting. If you really think hard and you have to dream a lot before you can start putting anything to paper. You have absorbed all the innate beauty of that landscape into your thoughts, and hopefully responding in that with the design. We have produced a design. It has been a lot of work. But I think it is going to be a pretty nice one. I don't think it is going to stick out or dominate the landscape. I think it is going to merge in very happily with it. So there are those sorts of challenges. We are doing one at Byron Bay on the side of a hill which is very difficult. Each of these sites demand a particular analysis in great detail before you can actually start to emerge with appropriate designs, and often it doesn't accord with what the owner wants, and that creates conflict with what I want to do and we generally end up having endless arguments. I generally win.

It does seem that your work in East Melbourne on the heritage has influenced the way you see your role as an architect in that you need to fit in with the environment.

Oh, very much so. You are exactly right. I mean we are born into this world and we have to respect the best parts of it when we are doing new work, or maintain old things which are good. I guess I was always turned on by keeping old buildings. When I was a little kid I lived in Ivanhoe in those days and there is a wonderful old hotel there which had fallen into rack and ruin and we as little kids used to love going in there at night and climbing through the rafters, all Cobb & Co, and it was absolutely derelict and one day the bull dozers arrived and by nightfall it had gone and myself and some of my friends in the area felt so sad and depressed that we had lost our wonderful playground. We felt a sense of anger, actually, and I guess that sparked something in me that maybe some of these old things should be kept rather than just wantonly destroyed.

I know my street has changed a lot. I live in Brighton and I lived there all my life in the same house and when I was a child there were these massive properties with beautiful old houses and now there are just blocks with three houses on them and it is just depressing because that is what my whole street looks like now and no longer are there these.

Well the sad thing about it is that sameness comes to dominate everything and in ten or fifteen years time it will probably just look like large tracts of Melbourne wherever they do that sort of thing. There is nothing definitive or long lasting about it. And then you think back and think, "If only those houses were still there." I know we have this great connection to the past and that's another thing. But I think governments now are much more aware of the past and it is just that the developers are pretty anxious, I mean, let's face it, north of Melbourne, if you go out to Mill

Park and Bundoora now and see those paddocks it is completely overrun. It is terrifying to drive up the road there and see endless roofs and I am thinking, "My God, maybe my house is in there, I don't know. But it is pretty off putting. I don't know if they give enough thought to creating spaces and building around open space, I mean the cost of land is so expensive and everything is so commercial now, but it is sad to see one little property disappear like that. I can remember at the start of the second world war, which I guess which dates me a bit – I was old enough to remember and Dad used to take me in Ivanhoe to see an old sheep farm on top of the hill and one day that disappeared and that was the start of the second world war and of course it was needed to build the military hospital at Heidelberg. Are you familiar with the military hospital?

No.

Ok, well it occupies a very large site which was formerly a sheep farm. And I can just remember, I think I was two. I have a very good memory, and I often think when I go past there of that old sheep farm. Of course it was a good decision, we had to have a hospital for the returned soldiers and servicemen who were wounded. But it just shows you, you know, there was a little creek which ran from that sheep farm around past our houses which backed on to open country side in those days and you could fish in that little creek. It was always bumbling along, and some kids used to swim it. It was one of those lovely little country creeks that you used to see, and I guess within about six months of the hospital opening there was steam rising from it and there was the most incredibly awful smell coming from it. And what had happened was, and there were no controls over anything in those days, but all the septic wash material from the hospital was just washed into the creek and it was incredible. And they are examples, and they were desperate days. But it certainly made me aware of how beautiful things could be suddenly destroyed over night almost. So that tendency to try and maintain things that are essentially of value in the world around us became very strong. So that is what a lot of my work has been about. And I am still working hard. I should have retired long ago.

But it is in you, though.

It is and I enjoy working very much with the people. I think you get to a certain stage in any profession where you do pick up a few clues along the way and probably wished I knew whatever I know now forty years ago. It would have been a lot easier.

It is always the way isn't it.

That is not to say you don't make mistakes, you have to be very much aware of what you are doing, yeah.

That has been great, thank you very much