

# Framed

## Queensland's built heritage through the lens of Richard Stringer, 1967–2021

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Queensland's built heritage through the lens of Richard Stringer,  
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In 1967, a young architect and recent arrival to Queensland organised a photographic exhibition: “Queensland Background: A photographic essay by Richard Stringer of possible influence in present day building.” The exhibition, which was held at the same time as the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and the National Architecture Student conferences, shared Richard Stringer’s (1936–) outsider’s eye on the built heritage of Queensland. He believed that modern architects could learn from the buildings of the past. By putting a frame around an image, Stringer’s aim was to make the viewer appreciate architecture and heritage.<sup>1</sup> This paper, based on oral interviews and primary source material, explores Stringer’s career and role in defining and cataloguing Queensland’s built heritage.

(1928–1986) he gained a love of history and heritage.<sup>2</sup>

After moving to Brisbane in 1963, Stringer worked for, and was briefly in partnership with, architect James Birrell (1928–2019). While supervising building work at Townsville’s James Cook University, he took the opportunity to explore north Queensland. On weekends he photographed buildings in Charters Towers, Ravenswood, Ingham, and Townsville, which became the core of the “Queensland Background” exhibition.<sup>3</sup> With this exhibition Stringer launched himself as an architectural photographer and began a five-decade career documenting buildings and landscapes. Stringer was also compiling one of the early lists of Queensland heritage buildings. At a time when the nascent National Trust of Queensland was concerned with classification of 19th century masonry buildings in Brisbane,<sup>4</sup> he was showcasing regional buildings made of timber, including houses and industrial structures.

Stringer’s interest in photography was sparked by his father, Walter, who was a keen photographer of ballet. As an architectural student at The University of Melbourne, Stringer borrowed his father’s camera to record buildings. He credits two university lecturers with having a significant influence on his career: From Fritz Janeba (1905–1983) he learnt the art of observation, and from David Saunders

As a photographer, Stringer was always a sole practitioner who preferred working by himself.<sup>5</sup> He was engaged by the Trust on a retainer and in 1968

1.

Richard Stringer, “Richard Stringer Architectural Photographer Oral History,” interview by State Library of Queensland, uploaded March 16, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/397877431>.

2.

Richard Stringer, interview.

3.

Richard Stringer, “Richard Stringer Interview #2,” interview by John Macarthur, Deborah van der Plaats, and Janina Gosseye, Digital Archive of Queensland Architecture, December 10, 2012, <https://qldarch.net/architect/interview/2552?architectId=298>; Richard Stringer, interview.

4.

National Trust of Queensland, *4th Annual Report* (National Trust of Queensland, 1966–1967).

5.

Richard Stringer, interview.

was commissioned as the Queensland photographer for the Australian Council of National Trust's publication "Historic Homesteads of Australia." He went on to contribute to five other publications in the series.<sup>6</sup> He also became a member of the Trust's buildings research committee and remained a member of its various research and listings committees for over twenty years.

Stringer travelled widely on commissions for private clients and the state Public Works Department. This enabled him to take photographs of heritage buildings and landscapes for the Trust. He would go places "just for the hell of it," to see what was there. Stringer's travels, curiosity, and keen eye meant that he was bring back to the Trust images from all over Queensland. The buildings and structures that he photographed shaped the Trust's heritage list and over time they became the nucleus of the national and state heritage registers.

Scholars such Claire Zimmerman have examined the relationship between modern architecture and photography,<sup>7</sup> and an important component of Stringer's practice was documenting contemporary buildings. He was the preferred

photographer of modernist architect Robin Gibson (1930–2014). Stringer was also a noted fine art photographer documenting every exhibition at the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane) from 1975 to 2014.

For over fifty years as a lone auteur, Stringer, firstly in black and white and more recently in colour, was pivotal in forming the aesthetic appreciation of Queensland's built heritage. Stringer's ability to capture industrial archaeology, particularly mining landscapes, is expectational. His fine eye revelled in abandonment and the patina of age and in part shaped how Queensland's built heritage is defined and valued. His body of work is not only an important historical record, but his photographs are themselves a vital part of Queensland's heritage. In 2021 he donated his entire collection, including 63,000 negatives and approximately 100,000 digital images, to the State Library of Queensland. No other photographer has for so long and so comprehensively depicted the richness of Queensland's built heritage.

6.

Richard Stringer and Michael Hawker, *Pleasure of Place* (South Brisbane, Qld.: Queensland Art Gallery, 2013).

7.

Claire Zimmerman, *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).