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## Edward H. Fickett, FAIA: An Enduring Legacy



Edward Fickett, FAIA.



Jacobson Residence, Edward Fickett, Architect. Photograph by Michael Locke.



Jacobson Residence, Edward Fickett, Architect. Photograph by Michael Locke.

The brief item in a recent AIA Los Angeles newsletter that announced the closing of the offices of Edward H. Fickett, FAIA, seemed to be the final chapter in the history of a pioneering American modernist architect who died in the closing year of the 20th century. Or was it?

Praised at the time of his death by California Governor Gray Davis as “an exceptional architect” who “made many contributions to his community and the people of this great state,” Edward Fickett applied his genius generously on local, state, national, and international stages. The outcome was a lasting legacy of excellence that to this day continues to delight his clients and inspire new generations of architects by his profound commitment to an ethic of service.

Inspired teacher, eloquent lecturer, a leader within his community and the AIA, advisor to an American president, and an award-winning architect, Edward Fickett was born in 1923. A fourth-generation Californian, his undergraduate years were spent at the University of Southern California and he received his Masters at MIT.

Although his contributions covered many scales including historic preservation, resort complexes, seismic retrofits, the development of master plans, port facilities, and military installations, it is not surprising that as a Californian his greatest contributions were arguably his innovative work in residential design. He brought a uniquely regional perspective that emphasized openness, light, functionality, and a gentle footprint on the landscape—all part of the DNA of 20th-century American modernists, most notably Frank Lloyd Wright.

Opening his practice toward the end of the Second World War, Fickett understood the critical need of America's veterans returning to civilian life, eager to put the war behind them and start families in a nation woefully lacking affordable, quality housing. More than simply appreciating the need, he believed that every veteran deserved to be able to buy a home.

He threw himself into this great task in two important ways. First, he traveled to campuses across the country with fellow California architects Schindler and Neuta, encouraging students



Jacobson Residence, Edward Fickett, Architect. Photograph by Michael Locke.

to consider architecture as a career. As a young man himself, Fickett's message fell on receptive ears.

Aware that the immediate need for quality and affordable new housing could not wait for a new generation of professionals, he did what came naturally to him then and for the rest of his career: He designed affordable houses—over 10,000 of them in the San Fernando Valley alone—homes that for their new owners felt, as his wife, Joyce, notes, “palatial.”

How did he achieve this while keeping an eye on the budgets of the prospective owners? By design.

Expansive floor to ceiling windows were walls of glass that not only tied the inhabitants of the house to the landscape, they also flooded the interior with natural light amplified by high ceilings and in many cases atriums. Sliding closet doors freed up space that otherwise would have been lost.

His childhood memories of being cut off from his mother as she prepared meals in the kitchen stayed with him as an architect, prompting him to rethink radically how space in the home could be rearranged to bring the family together. In his designs, floor plans were opened up, minimizing the segregation of activity within the home. The person preparing dinner in the kitchen had visual contact with those in the dining and living areas, a feature of contemporary domestic living now so common as to be unremarkable, but back when Fickett was designing his first homes quite revolutionary.

In addition to the effortless flow of living spaces, other features that distinguished a Fickett design included functionality, low maintenance, the skilled use of contemporary and regional materials, custom-built furnishings, built-in amenities such as bar and music storage, and a craftsman-like attention to the finish of the smallest details.

Ironically, over time these same traits designed to appeal to first-home buyers with little in credit or savings have become much sought-after by wealthy clients who today have boosted the selling price of a Fickett house far beyond what a returning World War II veteran could have ever dreamed to afford.

Yet the vicissitudes of the real estate market in no way diminish Edward Fickett's legacy. Indeed, the value of his vision has continued to grow. Because his was a democratic, service-oriented ethic, he committed his talent to provide beautiful, well-designed homes to house the American dream for thousands of families as they put behind them memories of the Depression and the Second World War. In doing so, he demonstrated the power of design to steer a third way between the sameness of mass-produced tract housing and high-end custom designs.

Edward Fickett's office is closed, but the achievement of this architect lives on, serving new clients and inspiring future generations of young architects to push their training and talent within reach of the entire community, demonstrating that good design is not a privilege, but the right of everyone.