

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Merildene
Other names: Flats

Citation No:
947



Address: 1 Victoria Avenue,
Ripponlea

Heritage Precinct: Ripponlea Residential

Category: Residential: Flats

Heritage Overlay: HO7

Style: Interwar

Graded as: Significant

Constructed: 1938

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Designer: Gordon E.E. Gibbon

Amendment: TBA

Comment: Revised citation

Significance

What is significant?

Merildene, a two-storey, late inter-war, clinker brick, block of flats, designed by Gordon E.E. Gibbon and constructed in 1938 at 1 Victoria Avenue, Ripponlea, is significant.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

Merildene, at 1 Victoria Avenue, Ripponlea is of local aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip

Why is it significant?

Merildene is of aesthetic significance as a well-detailed flat design, built within the constraints of an irregular shaped site. Due to the irregular shape of this site, Merildene has an unusually narrow facade to Victoria Avenue, and expressed on this narrow façade is a chimney embellished with tapestry brickwork and brick mouldings. The terracotta tile hip roof of the flats is obscured from the right-of way by a plain brick

parapet, and on the east elevation the roof projects above the wall to form eaves. The west elevation is divided into a series of bays by recesses, which create an interesting staggered effect when the block is viewed from the adjacent right-of-way. (Criterion E)

Thematic context

Victoria's framework of historical themes

6. Building towns, cities and the garden state: 6.3 Shaping the suburbs, 6.7 Making homes for Victorians

Port Phillip thematic environmental history

5. Buildings and cultural landscapes: 5.2 Shaping the suburbs (5.2.2 Private development), 5.3 Diverse Housing (5.3.5 Higher-density housing)

History

Contextual history

The early twentieth century saw a marked decline in the viability of large mansions across Melbourne's suburbs in general, but it was particularly felt in the more affluent inner southern suburbs such as St Kilda and Brighton, where land was highly sought-after by a new generation of homebuilders seeking smaller detached dwellings, duplexes or flats. The trend toward higher-density living in St Kilda began with the conversion of mansions and terrace houses into boarding houses in the early 1900s and continued with the first purpose-built flats that appeared at the beginning of World War I. A 1919 newspaper article noted:

It was held to be no longer necessary to labour with a house and all the domestic drudgery that entailed when by borrowing Continental ideas, people who could afford it could live in flats... Land has become so valuable the villa of the Victorian days, in a crowded thoroughfare, no longer shows anything like an adequate return of interest on the land's present capital value. It is more profitable to pull the house erected thereon down, and to erect flats. When the flat became popular in England the experiment was made in St Kilda, and it did not take long to discover there was a genuine demand for flats (Prahman Telegraph, 18 October 1919, p.4)

Higher-density housing in the form of boarding houses paved the way to flat development. Flats first appeared in Melbourne around 1906 and slowly spread to the suburbs. They followed a strong pattern of development, appearing close to transport routes, particularly along or within walking distance of tram routes, to allow easy travel to the city. With their proximity to the beach and parklands, good public transport networks and seaside character, the suburbs of St Kilda and Elwood were especially popular locations for flats. Flats became a dominant characteristic of St Kilda and Elwood, and still make up a high percentage of dwellings in those areas. They include some of the earliest surviving flats in Melbourne, some of the best examples of architectural styles and types of flats, and as a group demonstrate the increasing popularity of the lifestyle of flat living from the early twentieth century (TEH).

There was huge growth in flat development in St Kilda and Elwood in the 1920 and 1930s, attracting migrants, single people, and people of diverse sexuality. In 1920 there were 527 purpose-built flats in 92 blocks in St Kilda municipality. By 1925 this had increased to 884 flats in 164 blocks, including large complexes such as the Ardoch flats in Dandenong Road. By 1935, despite a slowing of development due to the Great Depression, there were more than 2,800 flats in over 500 blocks. A further 2,000 flats were added by 1940; however, the onset of World War II slowed development. Nonetheless, by 1947 St Kilda contained 5,500 purpose-built flats, a quarter of all flats in Melbourne (TEH).

Merildene

Land to the north and south of Glen Eira Road between Brighton Road and the Melbourne to Sandringham Railway Line was subdivided and offered for sale during the land boom of the late nineteenth century. By 1904 only eight villas had been constructed, including five along the south side (MMBW), as the economic depression of the 1890s halted development and it was not until the Ripponlea railway station was opened in 1913 that building recommenced. A shopping centre rapidly established along Glen Eira Road between the railway and Hotham Street with most of the shops constructed from 1913 to 1918. This served the growing residential areas developed on the vacant land to the north and new estates including the Quat Quatta and Erindale subdivisions to the south of Glen Eira Road.

The electrification of the railway in 1919 and the extension and electrification of the tramway along Brighton Road in 1925 and its extension, by 1926 from the terminus at Brunning Street to Glen Huntly Road in Elsternwick stimulated development and almost all the remaining vacant land to the north and south of Glen Eira Road was developed during the interwar period. This included the subdivision of the vast Brunning's Nursery as a housing estate, which included creation of the new streets of Los Angeles Court and Monkstadt Avenue. A boom in flat building along Brighton Road and its environs also followed the extension of the electric tram: between 1926 and 1941 no fewer than 21 blocks were constructed in Brighton Road between Carlisle Street and Glen Huntly Road, and many more in nearby streets.

The allotments along the south side of Glen Eira Road originally extended through to Victoria Avenue at the rear and this property formed part of the rear yard of a property occupied by a house originally known as Clondarvach. The 1904 MMBW plan shows a stables and other outbuildings in the location of the present flats.



Extract of MMBW Detail Plan No. 1451, dated 1904, showing future location of flats (indicated by star)

By the late interwar period a Mrs Grace Small Reid was the owner of Clondarvach and in 1938 she commissioned builder J.H. Jenkin to construct these flats on a small portion of the grounds to the south of a tennis court. The first building approval, issued in February, was for a building containing a two-storey two bedroom maisonette at the south end facing Victoria Avenue, and a single-storey two bedroom flat at the rear. However, just over one month later a further permit was granted for the addition of a second one bedroom flat immediately above the rear flat and with a similar floor plan. Gordon E.E. Gibbon was the architect for both stages of building (BP).

Originally known as the Merildene flats, they were originally listed at 4 Glen Eira Road in the Directories. A further two-storey addition was made in the post-war period.

Gordon E.E. Gibbon

Little is known about the architect Gordon E.E. Gibbon and this is the only building by the architect in the City of Port Phillip.

References

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Detail Plan No. 1451, dated 1904

O'Hanlon, Seamus, 'Home together, Home apart: Boarding house, hostel and flat life in Melbourne c.1900-1940', PhD Thesis, History Department, Monash University

Port Phillip Thematic Environmental History (TEH) **Version 1, July 2020**

St Kilda Council building permits (BP) nos. 9866, 11 February 1938 and 9908, 14 March 1938

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1935-1940

Sawyer, Terry, (1982) 'Residential flats in Melbourne: the development of a building type to 1950', Honours thesis, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne

Description

A two-storey, late inter-war, clinker brick, block of flats on an irregular-shaped block with a narrow frontage to Victoria Avenue. A right-of-way extends northwest from Victoria Avenue and forms the west boundary of the site. The block of flats is set back from Victoria Avenue behind a car park and a small services area.

Due to the shape of the site, the block of flats has a narrow elevation to Victoria Avenue, and this elevation has a chimney expressed as a relief to this narrow front wall. The chimney is embellished with tapestry brickwork and brick mouldings. The terracotta tile hip roof of the flats is obscured from the right-of-way by a plain brick parapet, and on the east elevation the roof projects above the wall to form eaves. The west elevation is divided into a series of bays by recesses, which create a staggered effect when the block is viewed from the right-of-way. Windows are mostly plain, timber, double-hung sash frames. Some smaller rectangular windows, with a horizontal orientation, are visible from the right-of-way, and these flank a chimney towards the rear of the block. Unlike the chimney adjacent to Victoria Avenue, this rear chimney is relatively plain.

Towards the rear of the block of flats is a landscaped area, and this can be accessed by vehicles via a roller shutter in the undercroft of a two-storey addition. This addition is similar in materials and detailing to the remainder of the block.

The building is in good condition and has a relatively high degree of external intactness.

Comparative analysis

According to Sawyer (1992:13-4) the shortage of houses and the desire for smaller, more manageable homes had been a factor in the development of flats, but a common criticism of early flat developments was the poor relationship of the building to its external space, a lack of privacy and the unsuitability of flats for families. Maisonettes – that is, a large flat over two levels with a separate entrance and internal private staircase – were one solution to the issues of privacy and space. Maisonettes emerged during the late 1920s and by the early 1930s had become a popular choice for wealthy residents in suburbs such as Toorak. The attraction of maisonettes was due to them being perceived as 'complete houses in miniature'. An article in the *Australian Home Beautiful* noted that:

That, however, does not mean that the rooms are small or pokily arranged. On the contrary, the 'maisonette' is remarkable for its feeling of spacious seclusion – achieved by the elimination of superfluous walls and passageways. (Australian Home Beautiful, 2 October 1933)

The need for a dedicated internal staircase for each residence, however, made them more expensive than conventional flats and very few maisonettes were constructed in Port Phillip during the interwar period. The earliest known example is Alcazar, built in 1929 at 3 Glen Eira Road, Ripponlea, not far from Merildene (Citation 327). Like Merildene, this is comprised of a mix of maisonettes (six in total) and conventional flats (two) and perhaps served as an influence upon its design. Other known examples of maisonettes in Port Phillip include:

- Maisonette & flat (1931), 34 Tennyson Street, Elwood (Citation 934, Significant within St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs precinct). Maisonette with (originally) single storey flat attached.
- Sunnyside Court (1934), 331 Inkerman Street, Balaclava (No citation, Contributory within the St Kilda East: Orange Grove precinct). Six maisonettes in the Old English style on a corner site.
- Duplex (c.1938), 2-3 Holroyd Court, St Kilda East (No citation, Contributory within St Kilda East: Holroyd Court Precinct). Pair of maisonettes in the Moderne style.
- 5 Bundalohn Court, St Kilda (1953-55, No citation, Contributory within St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs precinct). This comprises four maisonettes in a stepped plan with three one-bedroom flats situated above the garages at the rear of the site.

Assessment

This place has been assessed in accordance with the processes and guidelines outlined in the Australia ICOMOS *Charter for Places of Cultural Heritage Significance* (The Burra Charter) 2013, using the Hercon criteria.

Recommendations

Retain in the Heritage Overlay. Specific controls (external painting, internal alterations etc.) are not required.

Primary source

Peter Andrew Barrett, *H07 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations*, 2021

Other images