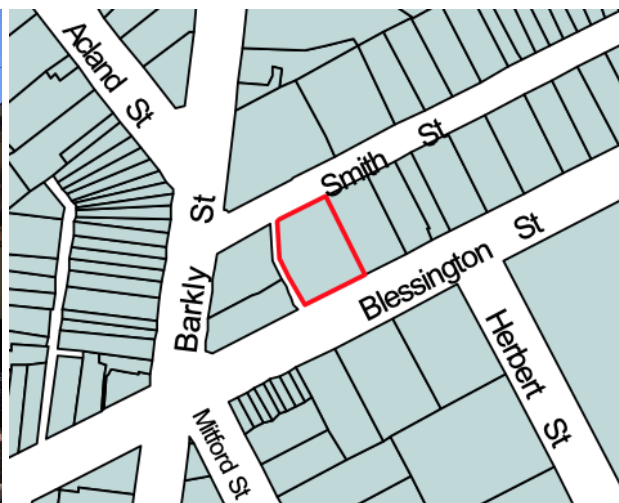


City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Clarendon
Other names: Flats

Citation No:
295



Address: 26-28 Blessington Street,
St Kilda

Heritage Precinct: St Kilda Botanical
Gardens & Environs

Category: Residential: Flats

Heritage Overlay: **HO7**

Style: Federation/Edwardian:
Arts & Crafts; Interwar

Graded as: Significant

Constructed: 1915, 1935

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Designer: Joseph Plottel

Amendment: TBA

Comment: Revised citation

Significance

What is significant?

Clarendon, a complex of two-storey rendered brick flats, at 26-28 Blessington Street, St Kilda, designed by architect Joseph Plottel, is significant. The flats were built in two stages, the first, in 1915. It is designed in an Arts & Crafts-style, and its palette of materials is applied to form a composition of fine detailing. In contrast, the second stage, built in 1935 and interlinked with a bridge to the first, is more restrained in its detailing, reflecting the emergence of Modernist influences in the inter-war period. A low clinker brick fence extends across the frontage of both flats.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

Clarendon, at 26-28 Blessington Street, St Kilda is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Clarendon, built in 1915, is historically significant as an early block of flats in St Kilda, preceding by a number of years the huge growth in flat development in this suburb that occurred in the inter-war period. Much of this early flat development was within the environs of the St Kilda Botanical Gardens, which,

because of its verdant landscape and proximity to public transport, shopping and services, was a popular locality with flat developers. (Criterion A)

Clarendon, built in 1915, is of representative significance as an early block of flats, which demonstrates the development of flat design in Melbourne. Of note is the planning of the access to the flats through an enclosed stairwell that is carefully integrated into the design, combined with the use of open external galleries. (Criterion D)

Clarendon, built in 1915, is a fine example of the Arts & Crafts style. The design of these flats uses a palette of materials that includes unpainted rendered walls, timber shingles and brackets, leadlight glazing, and unglazed terracotta Marseilles roof tiles. A similar complexity is found in the detailing, which creates, in places, a busy composition of decorative elements that includes bowed walls, a variety of fenestration treatments, and a dominant roof form supported in places by curved timber brackets. The inter-war block, although restrained in detailing, is sympathetic to the 1915 block in terms of its similar scale, form and materiality. (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 (Pahran 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).

Clarendon

The area surrounding the St Kilda Botanical Gardens, particularly the streets with direct views over the gardens, became a popular location for flats and some of the first flats in St Kilda were constructed here toward the end of World War I. These included this block of flats, known as Clarendon, which was designed by Joseph Plottel and constructed in 1915, and two blocks by Howard Lawson at 44 (Clairvaux) and 46 Blessington Street, constructed in 1917.

Clarendon was constructed by O. Townsend, builder, for Clarendon Pty Ltd at a cost of £3,100 (BP). Upon completion, an article in the *Herald* was most complimentary of the design, describing it as a 'suite of rooms like single dwellings' and a 'marked advance in residential flat planning and design':

A successful effort has here been made to remove from the collective residence the impression of a barracks, and to make it resemble in both exterior, design, and interior, plan, and equipment all the favourable points of a single family residence. (The Herald 27 January 1916, p.7 'Flats at St Kilda').

The two-storey building contained three flats (or 'suites') on each level, each containing four rooms including kitchen and bathroom with 'liberal allowance for linen presses and pantries'. Entry was via common entry and by common staircase to the first floor and then via open gallery access to the first-floor flats. Provision was made for electric light or gas heating and there was a washhouse on the roof (ibid).

In 1935 Joseph Plottel was once again engaged to design a second block of flats on the adjoining site at no.28, which replaced an earlier house. This was constructed for the owner Mrs. A Collier at a cost of £4,000 (BP).

Joseph Plottel

Joseph Plottel (1883-1965) trained as an architect in England and Melbourne. He was active in Melbourne between 1911 and World War Two. Plottel's oeuvre included a broad range of ably designed industrial, commercial and domestic buildings in a variety of styles. Two of his most notable designs include the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation Synagogue (1926, 1955) and Footscray Town Hall (1936), both now included on the Victorian Heritage Register. Other projects include 325 Collins Street (1911), 586 Bourke Street (1911), Yarra Yarra Golf Club (c.1929), the Venetian Court at the Hotel Australia (c.1930), and Flinders Way (c.1929), and the Beehive Building, Elizabeth Street (1934).

In Port Phillip, apart from the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation Synagogue, Plottel designed several houses and flats, many for Jewish clients (Plottel was himself Jewish), and all in St Kilda. He was somewhat of a pioneer and specialist in flat design and his Clarendon Flats, constructed in 1915 are among the earliest in the municipality. He also designed mixed use developments comprising shops on the ground floor with flats above (see Comparative analysis).

References

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. 2664, 1 July 1915, and 8909, 31 May 1935

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 complex of two-storey rendered brick flats erected in two stages. The first, and more intact building, built in 1915, is designed in an Arts & Crafts-style and has complexity in its use of materials, with unpainted roughcast rendered walls and shingle finishes on gable ends and a bowed balcony. Fenestration is expressed in varying ways including double-hung sash windows with multi-paned upper sashes, a bow window with casement windows, the arched entrance with leadlight glazing, and multi-pane doors with multi-pane sidelights and highlights to the balcony. A portion of the transverse gable roof projects forward to create a deep eaves supported by curved timber brackets. Elsewhere curved timber brackets support roof overhangs and external balconies that provide access to the first-floor flats. At the rear is a projecting bay with a balcony above with a hood supported by timber brackets. Internally, the entrance hall contains the original timber staircase. This early portion is identified as *Clarendon* with rendered signage.

In contrast, the latter, inter-war stage, is of a similar compositional arrangement but modest in its use of embellishment, responding to emerging Modernist influences in architectural design in the 1930s. It is of contributory value to the complex.

Unifying elements in the two portions, apart from the elevated walkway linking both, are the stepped clinker brick front fence and a uniform paint scheme.

The car park of the adjacent convenience store has exposed the utilitarian side elevation of the earlier block to its environs. The rear of the flats is visible from Smith Street.

The buildings are in good condition and have a relatively high degree of external intactness.

Comparative analysis

'The Canterbury', built in two stages in 1914 and 1919, at 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda is generally acknowledged to be the first purpose-built residential flats in Port Phillip, and one of the earliest in Melbourne. While the 'Majestic Mansions' in Fitzroy Street was completed two years earlier, not all of the residences in that building were fully self-contained. Stylistically, early flats in Port Phillip broadly fit into one of two types: Arts & Crafts, and Freestyle.

The Arts & Crafts style is characterized by features including the use of contrasting textures and materials on facades (such as facebrick, roughcast render, timber shingles and brackets to gables); entrance porches beneath the main roof supported on heavy battered piers or paired timber posts or columns resting on low piers; simple, geometric decoration created by projecting bricks or small voids (e.g., hit and miss brick walls); box windows (with timber frames that project from the wall, resting on timber or brick corbels) and semi-circular windows and openings.

There are many examples of Arts & Crafts style flats in St Kilda, several of which were designed by the prominent designer/builder Howard R. Lawson such as Wimmera (1917) and Clairvaux (1917). Biltmore (Dunlop & Hunt, 1922-23), which is included on the Victorian Heritage Register, is another fine Arts & Crafts design with Oriental influences.

Clarendon is one of the earliest blocks of flats in St Kilda, being built just one year after the first stage of the Canterbury. It is also one of several blocks of flats designed by Plottel. Others include:

- Waverley (1920) 115-119 Grey Street, St Kilda (PPHR citation 2003, Significant within HO5). Mixed use development of flats and shops in simple Arts & Crafts style.
 - Eildon Mansions (c.1922) 34 Eildon Road, St Kilda (PPHR citation 901, Significant within HO5). Large Arts & Crafts flats.
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In the 1930s Plottel designed several blocks of flats in the Old English style including Welford Lodge (1937, Significant within HO6 Precinct) 123 Alma Road, Clovelly (1938, PPHR citation 400, Significant within HO6 Precinct), and St Ives, 17 Charnwood Grove (1940, Significant within HO6 Precinct).

The design of Clarendon also demonstrates early approaches to flat design in Melbourne, particularly in the planning of the access to the flats through an integrated stairwell and open external galleries. Many early flat developments were created as the conversion of an existing house or houses, and the easiest way to provide access to first floor flats was to build an external stair. This design feature was used on some early flats as it had the advantage of being entirely independent of the internal plan of the flat, but it also had the considerable disadvantage of offering no protection from the weather. Consequently, external staircases became associated with poor quality flats and so the approach taken with some early flats was to make the stairwell an integrated part of the design and as inconspicuous as possible (Sawyer 1982:55). This is demonstrated at Clarendon, where the stairwell has been carefully integrated into the main elevation. This approach can also be seen at other early flats such as The Canterbury (1914, Citation 74), The Rand (1917, Citation 2052) and Wimmera (1917, Citation 914).

At Clarendon, the integrated enclosed stairwell is combined with an open gallery/verandah that provide access to the flats. However, as this too exposed occupants to the weather this feature was soon superseded by fully enclosed stairwells opening to small foyers or corridors in flats of the 1920s. By the 1930s, however, the increasing size of flats (and the numbers of flats within each building) made such layouts unworkable without the addition of long corridors or multiple stairwells. And so, architects re-introduced the open access gallery and they were commonly used in the Modern flat developments that emerged from the 1930s onwards such as Cairo, designed by Best Overend in 1936, and gallery access was to become the predominant way of providing access to flats until well into the post-war period (Sawyer 1982:56-7). Gallery access was to fall out of favour again by the late twentieth century, only to re-emerge more recently as the amenity benefits it offers in relation to sunlight and cross-ventilation have been appreciated.

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 with external paint controls.

Primary source

Peter Andrew Barrett, *HO7 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations*, 2021

Other images



At left shows the external access galleries to the first floor flat facing the internal courtyard – note the original timber bracket (adjoining post is a later addition). At right shows the staircase inside the entrance hall.

