

# City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

**Place name:** Poets Corner  
**Other names:** Flats

**Citation No:**  
**2067**



**Address:** 38 Mitford Street, Elwood

**Heritage Precinct:** St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs

**Category:** Residential: Flats

**Heritage Overlay:** HO376

**Style:** Interwar: Moderne

**Graded as:** Significant

**Constructed:** 1939

**Victorian Heritage Register:** No

**Designer:** Unknown (L.J. Cummins, builder)

**Amendment:** C29, C160

**Comment:** Revised citation

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## Significance

### What is significant?

Poets Corner, built by L.J. Cummins for Mrs. Zervas in 1939, at 38 Mitford Street, Elwood is significant. Poets Corner is a three-storey, block of cream brick, inter-war Moderne flats, situated on a prominent site at the junction of Mitford and Southey streets. The low brick front fence, the Bhutan cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*) and the Italian cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*) are contributory features.

Non-original alterations and additions are not significant.

### How is it significant?

Poets Corner at 38 Mitford Street, Elwood is of local aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

### Why is it significant?

Poets Corner is of aesthetic significance as a fine example of the Moderne-style, applied to a large block of flats on a prominent site at the junction of Mitford and Southey Streets. Although well-detailed, the building is restrained in its expression, and typical of the late inter-war period, where the modern movement had gained influence and popularity with architects and designers, and their clients. Despite the restraint in application of embellishment, a level of sensitivity in the massing and the limited detailing is evident, and this includes the prominent curved corner bay, with its slightly raised octagonal roof; and bays on the Mitford Street elevation defined by gentle curves in wall planes, and modest recesses in walls at the entrances. Other materiality and detailing is representative of its period and style, and this includes cream brick wall

finishes, steel frame casement windows, and the wrought iron *Poets Corner* signage. The setting of the flats is enhanced and complemented by the low cream brick fences and paths and the Bhutan cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*) and Italian cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*). (Criterion E)

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## 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)

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## 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 (Prahlan 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).

## Poets Corner

The area surrounding the St Kilda Botanic Gardens has been a desirable residential neighbourhood since the Gardens were first established in 1860 and by the end of the nineteenth century Blessington, Tennyson, Dickens and Herbert streets were lined with substantial villas, and mansions set in large grounds. By the early twentieth century with the proximity to tram routes, and views over or access to the gardens, this area 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 Clarendon, designed by Joseph Plottel and constructed in 1915 at 26-28 Blessington Street, and two blocks by Howard Lawson at 44 (Clairvaux) and 46 Blessington Street, constructed in 1917. Some of the early mansions such as St Albans (74 Blessington Street) and Himalaya (10 Tennyson Street) were also converted to flats around this time.

In the late nineteenth century, this property at the corner of Mitford and Southey streets was occupied by a villa residence, one of several along the western side, while the Ascog mansion and its extensive grounds occupied much of the east side (MMBW). However, the economic depression of the 1890s halted development for over a decade and development only recommenced following the opening in 1906 of the electric tramway from St Kilda Station to Elwood and Brighton Beach via Mitford Street and Broadway. Development was slow at first but improvements to the route including progressive duplication from 1913 stimulated development and encouraged the building of flats especially along Mitford Street and Broadway, but also in adjoining streets. The first blocks of flats were duplexes constructed in 1917: at 71 Mitford Street, designed by Schreiber & Jorgenson and 13 Southey Street, designed by J.J. Meagher. In the following year, W.A. Tombs designed Birnam, a block of four, at 15 Mitford Street. The building of flats gathered pace during the interwar period and by 1940 more than 30 blocks had been erected in Mitford Street, with a further eight in Southey Street (BP).

Poets Corner was built in 1939 for Mrs. Zerfas at a cost of £13,000. L.J. Cummins of Caulfield South was the builder. The building comprised 18 one and two bedroom flats over three levels and the three flats situated at the northern end of the building benefitted from an additional sunroom within the semi-circular projecting bay. The building plans do not bear the name of the architect or designer. However, one possibility is the architect Kurt Elsner, who occupied one of the flats at Poets Corner. In 1940 Elsner designed a Moderne style flat building also built by Cummins for the same clients in Eildon Road (BP).

Poets Corner refers to the traditional naming of streets in Elwood after English and Australian poets and writers.

## References

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Detail Plan No. 1386, 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 permit (BP) no. 10336, 1 August 1939, (also building register cards for Mitford and Southey streets)

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

Poets Corner is a three-storey, block of cream brick, inter-war Moderne flats, situated on a prominent site at the junction of Mitford and Southey Streets. Apart from a deep garden setback at the apex of this triangular site, the setbacks from street boundaries of this building are relatively shallow.

Poets Corner is V-shaped in plan, and has a series of hip roofs clad in terracotta tiles. The roofs project to form eaves. At the apex of the v-shaped plan, the side elevations curve to form a recess from where a curved-bay projects forward facing the junction of Mitford and Southey Streets. The roof of this bay is octagonal and steps up from the adjacent roof form. Each level of the curved bay is divided into four wall

openings in a tripartite steel-frame casement arrangement. Deep rendered bands extend above the heads of the windows, and cills are rendered with shallow rendered bands. Wrought iron signage that reads *Poets Corner* is fixed on the curved bay between the first and second floors.

The walls are curved at points along the Mitford Street elevation to define bays. The two broader bays contain entrances to stairwells in a modest recess. These are expressed externally with plain rendered hoods above the doorways and the stairwells lit with narrow vertical windows. Windows on each flat are steel frame casements in various configuration. Cills on the ground floor windows are rendered, the cills of the windows on the upper floors are formed with cream brick. The south ends of the elevations in Mitford and Southey streets curve and have a rendered band above windows that is like the detail on the curved bay at north. Visible from Southey Street is a cream brick banded chimney.

The flats are complemented by a low cream brick front fence that returns along the entry paths to the flats, which have cream brick stairs and stepped balustrade. The Bhutan cypress (*Cupressus torulosa*) at the north corner and the Italian cypresses (*Cupressus sempervirens*) beside the circular bay, and the northernmost entrance on the Mitford Street side contribute to the setting of the flats.

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

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## Comparative analysis

Streamline Moderne emerged in the early 1930s and quickly became a popular style for flats because of its modern and progressive image. Streamline Moderne buildings generally have a horizontal emphasis, sometimes with an emphatic vertical 'anchor' (often stairwells or chimneys) to balance the composition. Further horizontal lines could be added by roof parapets (partially concealing the ubiquitous hip roof), and even window muntins. Windows were often located at corners and there is frequent use of curved balconies and building corners. Ornamentation is stripped down, and metal elements such as balcony railings are quite simple with clean lines. Smooth render and clinker bricks were popular at this time, though more avant-garde architects were already turning to cream and apricot bricks by the 1930s. The later, or more 'advanced', examples also had steel windows, and show a transition to the International ('Modern' or 'Functionalist') style.

The earliest Moderne flats in Port Phillip are The Royal, 1 Robe Street, St Kilda (Citation 788), designed in 1933 by Archibald Ikin, and Avenue Court, 64-66 Victoria Avenue, Albert Park (no citation) designed in 1934 by I.G. Anderson. Anderson was one of the foremost proponents of the Moderne style in Victoria and his other Moderne flats in Port Phillip include 25 Dickens Street, Elwood (1938, Citation 894), and Park Gate, 352 Albert Road, South Melbourne (c.1940, no citation). Stuart M. Hall is another architect who is strongly associated with the Moderne style. In Port Phillip he designed Del Marie, 4 St Leonard's Avenue, St Kilda (1936, Citation 221) and a duplex at 18A Murchison Street (1936, no citation).

Another important example is Windermere, 49 Broadway, Elwood designed in 1936 by J.H. Esmond Dorney, which is now included on the Victorian Heritage Register. The Moderne influence is also evident in Dorney's other flats such as Garden View, 60 Blessington Street, St Kilda (Citation 429).

Poet's Corner is a fine example of the Moderne flats built in the late 1930s with typical materials and details including cream brick walls with curved wall corners, steel framed windows, and the wrought iron *Poets Corner* signage. Although well-detailed, the building is restrained in its expression, and typical of the late inter-war period, where the modern movement had gained influence and popularity with architects and designers, and their clients. Despite the restraint in application of embellishment, a level of sensitivity in the massing and the limited detailing is evident, and this includes the prominent curved corner bay, with its slightly raised octagonal roof; and bays on the Mitford Street elevation defined by gentle curves in wall planes, and modest recesses in walls at the entrances and stairwells, which are expressed as vertical elements in the facade. It is notable for its unusual V-plan, which is a response to the corner site and the distinctive circular bay to the north end with original signage, and for its high degree of intactness which includes the original low brick front fence. The setting is also enhanced by three mature cypresses.

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## 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.

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## Recommendations

Retain in the heritage overlay with external paint and tree controls. Apply front fence controls.

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## Primary source

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

## Other studies

Andrew Ward & Associates, *City of Port Phillip Heritage Review*, 1998

Robert Peck von Hartel Trethowan, *St Kilda 20th century Architectural Study*, Volume 3, 1992

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## Other images





