

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Southey Court
Other names: Flats

Citation No:
2064



Address: 41 Milton Street, Elwood

Category: Residential: Flats

Style: Interwar: Mediterranean

Constructed: 1925

Designer: B.S.W. Gilbertson

Amendment: C29, C160

Comment: Revised citation

Heritage Precinct: St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs

Heritage Overlay: **HO7**

Graded as: Significant

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Significance

What is significant?

Southey Court, a Mediterranean-style block of two-storey flats, designed by B.S.W. Gilbertson, and built in 1925, at 41 Milton Street, Elwood is significant. The low rendered front fence also contributes to significance of the place.

Non-original alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

Southey Court at 41 Milton Street, Elwood is of local aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Southey Court is of aesthetic significance as a fine and intact example of a block of two-storey, rendered brick, inter-war flats, designed in the Mediterranean-style, situated on a prominent site. The cuboid massing of the flats, with its hip roof clad in unglazed terracotta tiles, and its deep eaves are typical of this style, as is materiality and detailing including rendered wall finishes and timber frame windows with leadlight in upper sashes. The notable element on the front elevation, is a central arched loggia on both levels. The external stairs that extend along both side elevations, with their distinct arched porches capped with a small hip roof, provide fine book ends to the composition. The setting of the flats is complemented by the low, rendered-brick, front fence. (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 (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).

Southey Court

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 nineteenth century, Southey Street north of Milton Street was partially developed and contained several villas 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).

Southey Court, comprising four flats over two levels, was constructed in 1925 for C. Swinburne on the site formerly occupied by a Victorian villa. B.S.W. Gilbertson (who was also St Kilda City Engineer) was the architect (BP). This was the second block of flats constructed in Mitford Street, and one of two flat developments designed by Gilbertson for Swinburne. Gilbertson also designed the house at 29 Southey Street (south side of Southey Grove) for Swinburne in 1926 (see below).

B.S.W. Gilbertson

B.S.W. Gilbertson was the St Kilda City Engineer for many years. While employed as City Engineer he also designed several blocks of flats in St Kilda and Elwood, as well as the additions to the St Kilda Town Hall in 1939. Apart from Southey Court his other known buildings in Port Phillip are:

- St Margaret Mansions, 25 Dalgety Street, St Kilda (1925), Conversion of two, three storey Victorian terrace houses into six flats (Citation 883)
- Brynmawr, 2 Inverleith Court, St Kilda (1926). Mediterranean style flat complex. Similar details to Southey Court (No citation)
- Waiora. 5 & 5A Mitchell Street, St Kilda (1926). Duplex in the interwar bungalow style with Arts & Crafts details (Citation 2065)
- Ormond Court, 1 Glen Huntly Road, Elwood (1926) Mediterranean style flat complex. Similar details to Southey Court. (Citation 411)
- House, 29 Southey Street, Elwood (1926). Two storey house with Arts & Crafts detailing. (No citation)
- Gurner Court, 74 Grey Street, St Kilda (1933). Old English style flats, two-storey around a central courtyard. (No citation)

References

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Detail Plans Nos. 1386, 1394, 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. 6232 granted 12 November 1925, (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

Southey Court is a two-storey block of inter-war flats, designed in a Mediterranean-style, on a prominent site at the southwest corner of the intersection of Milton and Southey Streets. The flats have a hip roof clad in glazed terracotta tiles, which forms deep eaves. The walls are finished in roughcast render (relieved by smooth render around the arched openings on the ground floor) above a clinker brick plinth. The front elevation faces Southey Street, and this is symmetrically composed with a central arched loggia on both levels, which each have balustrades with a cross motif. Flanking the loggias are timber frame double-hung sash windows in a tripartite arrangement on both levels. These windows, and other tripartite windows on the side elevations, have leadlight in their upper sashes.

Access to the flats is from porches on the ground and first floors on both side elevations. The upper porches are reached by stairs and have the same cross detail to the balustrade. The porches have arched openings, one side arch on each of the porches on the ground floor is awkwardly truncated where it connects with the base of the stairs. Other detailing on the flats includes the rendered signage *Southey Court*, and the chimneys on the side elevations with diamond patterns at their tops, which are flanked by small picture windows with leadlight glazing. The rear elevation, in contrast to the front and sides, is relatively plain, but has similar materiality and shares some detailing of other elevations such as small box windows. The flats are set back with shallow gardens from each street boundary behind the original low rendered brick fence.

The building is in good condition and has a relatively high degree of integrity. The ground floor loggia has been enclosed with glazing.

Comparative analysis

The Mediterranean Revival style appeared in Australia in the late 1910s in response to the temperate climate and sunlight, which were conducive to 'an architecture of simple shapes, light and shade, bleached pastel colours and accents of classical detail', according to Leslie Wilkinson, who helped popularise the style in Australia after his arrival in 1918. Through his influence, and that of architect Hardy Wilson, the style gained popularity and was first applied to domestic architecture in upper and upper-middle class suburbs. In the 1920s, many saw Mediterranean-based design as a potential basis for a future national style.

The Mediterranean style is related to the Interwar Spanish Mission style, but is intentionally designed with subtler features, in a simple yet elegant form. Derived from the coastal architecture of Spain and Italy it was well-suited to St Kilda and Elwood's seaside location and was a popular style for flat developments.

Aesthetically, the massing and restrained character of the style underlines a relationship to the Georgian Revival, but the basic difference is the way in which the buildings are designed to respond to sunlight. Balconies are common, deep porches shade entrance doors and the eaves lines are more prominent, and the classical detailing tends to be more playful than that of the Georgian style. Typical details include pergolas, balconies, arcaded loggia and a formal entrance, with sidelights and highlights, while Tuscan columns appear in verandahs and porches. The exterior is lightly bagged or cement-rendered. Large double-hung sashes often have small panes with narrow wooden glazing bars, sometimes with louvered shutters.

Southey Court is a fine and intact example of flats in the Mediterranean-style and the earliest known example in Port Phillip. The cuboid massing of the flats, with its hip roof clad in unglazed terracotta tiles, and its deep eaves are typical of this style, as is materiality and detailing including rendered wall finishes and timber frame windows with leadlight in upper sashes. The notable element on the front elevation, is a central arched loggia on both levels. The external stairs that extend along both side elevations, with their distinct arched porches capped with a small hip roof, provide fine book ends to the composition. The setting of the flats is complemented by the low, rendered-brick, front fence.

Southey Court compares with the flats, each designed in 1926 by Gilbertson, which share similar detailing: Ormond Court, 1 Glen Huntly Road, Elwood (for the same client, Citation 411), and Brynmawr at 2

Inverleith Court, St Kilda (no citation, Contributory within the St Kilda Hill precinct). It also compares favourably with other Mediterranean style flats in Port Phillip, which include:

- Colombo Court, 52A Acland Street, St Kilda (1927) designed and constructed by Jennings & Co. [probably same as E. Jennings & Son] (Citation 389)
- Harley Court, 52 Acland Street, St Kilda (1927) E. Jennings & Son (Citation 390)
- Baynton, 3 Robe Street, St Kilda (1929) designed by Archibald Ikin (No citation)
- Maison Parisienne, 122 Brighton Road, Ripponlea (1932) E. Jennings & Son (Citation 2424)
- Corinthian, 5 Robe Street, St Kilda (1933) E. Jennings & Son (Citation 789)
- Mount Tabor, 23 Dickens Street, Elwood (1936) Archibald Ikin (Citation 2081)

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 paint controls.

Primary source

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

Other studies

David Bick, *St. Kilda Conservation Study*, Area 2, 1985

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

Other images