

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Las Palmas and Santa Fe
Other names: Flats

Citation No:
2438



Address: 43 and 45 Mitford Street,
Elwood

Heritage Precinct: St Kilda Botanical
Gardens & Environs

Category: Residential: Flats

Heritage Overlay: **HO7**

Style: Interwar: Spanish Mission,
Mediterranean

Graded as: Significant

Constructed: 1928-29

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Designer: J.H. Soderberg (Builder)

Amendment: TBA

Comment: Revised citation

Significance

What is significant?

Las Palmas and Santa Fe, the flats designed and built by J.H. Soderberg in 1928-29, at 43 and 45 Mitford Street, Elwood are significant. Using a similar plan, the two blocks are designed with subtle differences, one in a restrained Mediterranean-style (Las Palmas) and the other in a more heavily detailed, if not expressive, application of the Spanish Mission (Santa Fe) in its use of fenestration and detailing. The low rendered front fences to the flats also contribute to the significance of the place.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

Las Palmas and Santa Fe are of local representative and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Las Palmas and Santa Fe are of representative value as evidence of the array of popular styles used on flats designed in the inter-war period. The subtleties of some styles demonstrated with this pair of flats, designed by J.H. Soderberg, where Santa Fe is a designed in a Spanish Mission-style, and Las Palmas designed in a less exuberant Mediterranean-style. (Criterion D)

Las Palmas is of aesthetic significance as a good example of a block of flats designed in a restrained application of the Mediterranean-style. Symmetrically composed, with a central bay containing a stairwell, flanked by balconies (some now enclosed), detailing is applied sparingly and includes the wall openings on the upper level that reference loosely the Serliana motif, a rendered shield and fan motif on the walls of the central bay, and the hood above the entrance with the rendered signage *Las Palmas*. (Criterion E)

Santa Fe is of aesthetic significance as a fine example of a block of flats designed in a Spanish Mission-style. In comparison with its neighbour, Las Palmas, the detailing on Santa Fe is applied vigorously to achieve a fine and expressive composition. This is demonstrated in the arcuation on wall openings of the façade, which are pairs of arches supported by intermediate barley twist columns, and on the upper level two broad semi-circular openings at each side of the central bay. Other detailing that alludes to Spanish/Moorish precedents are the bulbous domes at the top of the pilasters that form the central bay. (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. 370 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).

Las Palmas and Santa Fe

The area surrounding the St Kilda Botanical 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.

With the proximity to tram routes along Carlisle Street, Brighton Road and Mitford Street, and access to the beach and public gardens and shopping centres as well as the nearby school in Brighton Road, 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 Mitford Street, the first blocks of flats were the duplex constructed in 1917 at 71 Mitford Street, designed by Schreiber & Jorgenson and Birnam, a block of four, designed in 1918 by W.A Tombs 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).

In the early twentieth century the present 43 and 45 Mitford Street formed part of the extensive grounds surrounding a Victorian villa known as Carleon (MMBW). In 1928 the villa was demolished, and the land subdivided into eight lots (three facing Mitford Street, two facing Dickens and the final three fronting Ruskin Street), all of which were developed with flats (LV).

Santa Fe and Las Palmas were constructed in 1928 and 1929, respectively, by builder and developer, J.H. Soderberg. It is likely that Soderberg also designed each building, which have similar floorplans comprising six flats (two on each level opening off a central stairwell) and facades with detailing influenced by the Spanish Mission and Mediterranean styles (BP).

Soderberg also designed and constructed flats on four of the other allotments in the subdivision: Diana Court (1927) 41 Dickens Street; Knights Court (1927-28) 43 Dickens Street; Kingsford Court (1928-29) 1 Ruskin Street; and Silvertown (1928-29) 3 Ruskin Street (BP).

References

Land Victoria (LV) Plan of subdivision, LP 12451, 20 April 1928

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Detail Plan Nos. 1380, 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) nos. 7445, 13 April 1929 (Las Palmas); 9145, 16 December 1935 (La Rochelle), also entries for Dickens and Ruskin streets.

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1930, 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

Las Palmas

Las Palmas is one of a pair of three-storey, rendered brick, inter-war flats in this portion of Mitford Street. It has a large hip roof, with a smaller hip projecting forward that contains balconies on each level.

The restrained Mediterranean-style façade of Las Palmas is symmetrically composed, with a central stairwell bay that has an entrance with double-doors of glazed panels, beneath a flattened-arch hood. Above this hood is “Las Palmas” in rendered signage. The upper levels of the central bay have square openings, the top floor opening with an unusual semi-circular arched profile at centre, probably a reference to the Serlian window form. This profile is repeated on the flanking balcony openings. The central bay is topped with a parapet that has a pointed pediment flanked by pilasters that extend the full height with pyramidal caps. A rendered circular motif and fan motif also embellish the central bay. Some of the balconies including openings on the sides have been enclosed with glazing.

The flats are set back from Mitford Street behind a shallow garden, and a drive at right forms a side setback. The fall of the land away from Mitford Street forms a basement level to the flats. A low rendered brick fence extends along the Mitford Street boundary, which has a central pedestrian gateway that leads to the front door of the flats.

Santa Fe

Santa Fe is one of a pair of three-storey, rendered brick, inter-war flats in this portion of Mitford Street of a cuboid massing, and is layered with historic detailing. Despite the name, Santa Fe, having references to Spanish Colonial North America, more directly some of the detailing makes subtle references to Moorish architecture of North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula.

The façade is symmetrically composed, with a central stairwell bay that forms a projecting loggia. This has an entrance with double-doors of glazed panels, beneath a hood. Above this hood is Santa Fe in rendered lettering. The upper levels of the central bay have pairs of arches, each pair with a central barley twist column. The pilasters that form the central bay are topped with small Moorish-style bulbous dome elements. Panels of rendered saltire crosses (diagonal mouldings), provide visual relief to the textured rendered walls and balustrades of balconies, and make a subtle reference to the geometric patterns of Islamic architecture such as screens that traditionally form wall surfaces.

Flanking the central bay are broader bays with pairs of arched windows on the ground and first floors, which also have a central barley twist column. On the upper floor are broad semi-circular arched openings. Behind these arches are balconies with windows with a tripartite arrangement. One side of each balcony has an arched opening. Panels of saltire crosses are also beneath these wall openings.

A low rendered brick fence extends along the Mitford Street boundary, which has a central pedestrian gateway that leads to the front door of the flats.

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

Comparative analysis

Spanish Mission is a romantic and evocative style. It emerged in the late nineteenth century in the United States and was popularized in the 1920s, particularly in California and Florida. In Australia, awareness of the style owed much to the influence of Hollywood and the first examples appeared by the mid-1920s. It is characterized by use of light tones and colours, exploitation of sunlight and shadow and concentrations of elaborate ornament contrasted with plain surfaces. Buildings are generally asymmetrical with stuccoed wall surfaces with simulated handcrafted texture. Roofs are medium pitched and often feature half-round tiles. Distinctive features include arcaded loggias and balconies, often supported by ‘barley twist’ columns, and

use of decorative wrought-iron work, ceramic tiles or plaster ornament, often invoking classical features. Fences were often high and solid. (Apperly, 1989:179, Cuffley 2007:94-97).

The earliest and perhaps finest Spanish Mission flats in Port Phillip is Aston Court, designed by Edwin J. and C.L. Ruck in 1926. This is notable for the deep arcaded balcony/verandah, and arched openings to the stairwell with barley twist or plain Tuscan columns, and the unusual, scalloped screen pattern to the balustrade.

The U-plan of Aston Court was used at several other Spanish Mission flats in Port Phillip including Winnipeg, 51 Blessington Street, St Kilda (Citation 427) designed and constructed by J.H. Johnson in 1930 and Findon, 1 Milton Street, Elwood (no citation) designed and constructed by W.P. Sinclair in 1933. At Winnipeg, the focus is on the central arcaded porch/balcony with barley twist columns, which has a Baroque influenced parapet, while Findon is distinguished by the Baroque influenced parapets to the projecting wings. In most other examples, it is represented by details overlaid as façade decoration upon otherwise simple building forms. Sante Fe is an example of this and compares with Los Angeles Court, 81A Spenser Street, St Kilda (1930, J.H. Johnson, Citation 13), which has a simple rectangular plan and a hipped tile roof. This has arcaded openings with barley twist columns to the external side stair porch and the balconies (now enclosed) and rendered panels and a similar saltire cross pattern to the balcony balustrades.

The inter-war Mediterranean style is related to the 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.

The earliest Mediterranean style flats in Port Phillip are Southey Court, 41 Milton Street, Elwood (Citation 2064) designed by B.S.W. Gilbertson and built in 1925. Gilbertson also applied the Mediterranean style to Ormond Court (1926) 1 Glen Huntly Road, Elwood (Citation 411), and Brynmawr at 2 Inverleith Court, St Kilda (1926). Other examples of flats in the Mediterranean style in Port Phillip 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)
- Masefield Court, 115 Brighton Road (1934) Archibald Ikin (Citation 440)
- Mount Tabor, 23 Dickens Street, Elwood (1936) Archibald Ikin (Citation 2081)

Together, Las Palmas and Santa Fe provide evidence of the array of popular styles used on flats designed in the inter-war period. The subtleties of some styles is demonstrated with this pair of flats, designed by J.H. Soderberg, where Santa Fe is a designed in a Spanish Mission-style, and Las Palmas designed in a less exuberant Mediterranean-style.

Las Palmas is a good example of a block of flats designed in a restrained application of the Mediterranean-style. Symmetrically composed, with a central bay containing a stairwell, flanked by balconies (some now enclosed), detailing is applied sparingly and includes the wall openings on the upper level that reference loosely the Serliana motif (also used in flats designed and built by E. Jennings & son such as Corinthian and Maison Parisienne), a rendered shield and fan motif on the walls of the central bay, and the hood above the entrance with the rendered signage *Las Palmas*.

Santa Fe is a fine example of a block of flats designed in a Spanish Mission-style. In comparison with its neighbour, Las Palmas, the detailing on Santa Fe is applied vigorously to achieve a fine and expressive composition. This is demonstrated in the arcuation on wall openings of the façade, which are pairs of arches supported by intermediate barley twist columns, and on the upper level two broad semi-circular openings at each side of the central bay. Other detailing that alludes to Spanish/Moorish precedents are the bulbous domes at the top of the pilasters that form the central bay.

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 (**OR SPECIFY IF THEY ARE**).

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

Other images



Las Palmas – entry and fence detail



Santa Fe – entry and fence detail