City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: La Tourelle and La Rochelle	**Citation No:**
Other names: Flats	**2439**

La Tourelle

La Rochelle

Address:	**47A Brighton Road and 1A Dickens Street, Elwood**	**Heritage Precinct:**	**St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs**
Category:	**Residential: Flats**	**Heritage Overlay:**	**HO7**
Style:	**Interwar: Old English, Mediterranean, Moderne**	**Graded as:**	**Significant**
Constructed:	**1935-36, 1951**	**Victorian Heritage Register:**	**No**
Designer:	**W.H. Merritt, Dr Ernest Fooks**		
Amendment:	**TBA**		
Comment:	**Revised citation**		

Significance

What is significant?

La Tourelle and La Rochelle, the flats designed by architect and engineer, W.H. Merritt, and constructed in 1935-36, at 47A Brighton Road and 1A Dickens Street, Elwood are significant. The design of La Tourelle (built in 1935) reflects the influences of the inter-war Old English and Moderne styles (with some Mediterranean accents), while La Rochelle (1936) is designed in the Streamline Moderne style. The low random rubble bluestone fences and privet hedges also contribute to the significance of the flats.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

La Tourelle and La Rochelle are of local historical, representative and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Together, La Tourelle and La Rochelle are historically significant as evidence of the boom in flat development that occurred in the 1930s in St Kilda and Elwood. They are representative of the larger

apartment complexes comprising two or more blocks on a single site constructed from the 1930s onwards (Criteria A and D).

Together, La Tourelle and La Rochelle are significant as evidence of the array of styles being used on flat designs in the inter-war period. La Tourelle is representative of a more traditional approach and used historicism as an influence, while La Rochelle is representative of the emerging popularity and influence of the Modern Movements of Europe and United States. (Criterion D)

These two blocks of inter-war flats are designed by the eminent inter-war architect, W.H. Merritt, and are of demonstrative of his work and his ability to design in an array of styles popular in the 1930s. La Rochelle is of particular note, as it marks a turning point in Merritt's career, where from this time his work is by and large of a Modern idiom. (Criterion D)

La Tourelle is of aesthetic significance as an example of the survival of historicism in design aesthetics into the mid-1930s, despite the growing interest and popularity of the emerging Modern Movement in Australia. La Tourelle demonstrates historicism expressed in an Old English-style with accents of the Mediterranean-style, overlaid with some Modernist influences. The historicism is expressed most notably with the corner tower faced in brickwork, its expressed hip roof that is clad in terracotta tiles, rendered walls and small balconies. Modernist references including Chicago-style windows, rendered panels of Moderne detailing at the top of the tower, horizontal glazing bars on windows, wrought ironwork, and the relatively plain horizontal hoods above entrances. (Criterion E)

La Rochelle is of aesthetic significance, and in contrast to La Tourelle, is an uncompromisingly Moderne composition, expressed with strong horizontality defined by broad sweeping curved balconies that serve as bookends to the Dickens Street elevation. This is complemented by a plain parapet that is curved at its ends, which conceals the hip roof of the flats and gives the impression that La Rochelle has a flat roof. The horizontal emphasis is relieved with the verticality of the expressed stairwell that is finished in brick. This bay of brickwork provides a fine contrast, to what is otherwise a large expanse of render on the remainder of the Dickens Street elevation. (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 (Prahran Telegraph, 18 October 1919, p.4)
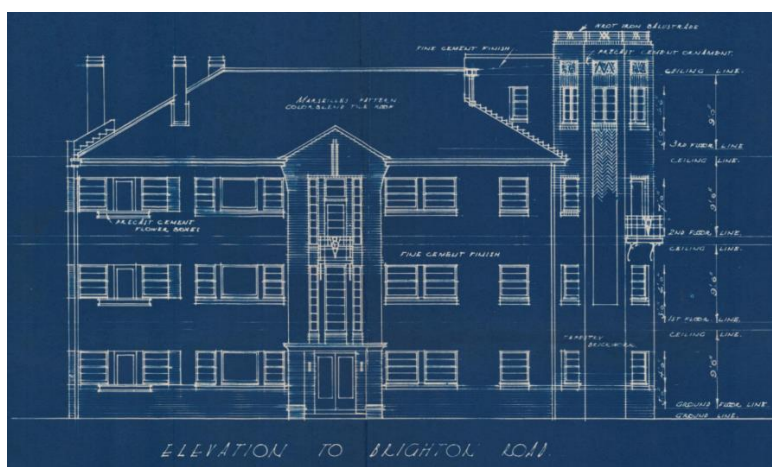
Higher-density housing in the form of boarding houses paved the way to flat development. Flats first appeared in Melbourne around 1906 and slowly spread to the suburbs. They followed a strong pattern of development, appearing close to transport routes, particularly along or within walking distance of 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).
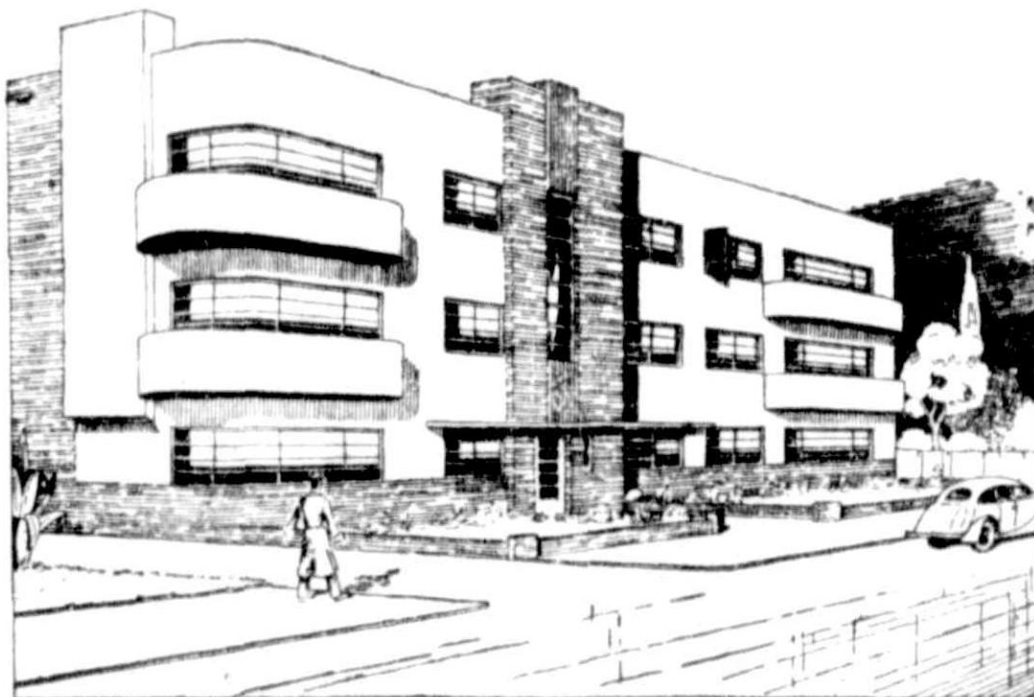
La Tourelle and La Rochelle

The first flats in Brighton Road began to appear by the end of World War I. One of the first was Yurnga, designed by local architect Harry R. Johnson, which was built in 1920 at the south corner of Brunning Street, Balaclava directly opposite the cable tram terminus. The electrification of the cable tram in Brighton Road and its extension, by 1926, from the terminus in Brunning Street to Glen Huntly Road in Elsternwick encouraged the building of flats along the route. Between 1926 and 1941 no fewer than 21 blocks were constructed in Brighton Road between Carlisle Street and Glen Huntly Road with many more in the adjoining streets.

In the early twentieth century the property at the south corner of Dickens Street and Brighton Road contained a large Victorian-era villa. In the mid-1930s this house was demolished and replaced by two blocks of flats commissioned by the new owners, Mr. & Mrs. Robert and Louise Renof. The first, known as La Tourelle, was built in 1935 at the corner facing Brighton Road and contained nine flats over three levels, one of which was occupied by the Renofs. Presumably, this was the second-floor corner flat, which had the benefit of an internal staircase leading to two rooms within the top of the corner tower (a sunroom) and immediately behind. Also shown on the layout plans was a 'rock fence' to the two street boundaries (BP).

Original elevation plan of La Tourelle. (Source: City of Port Phillip building files)

La Rochelle was completed in the following year, on the adjoining land to the rear facing Dickens Street and contained 17 flats over three levels. 'La Tourelle' translates as 'the turret', presumably a reference to the corner tower incorporated into the building, while 'La Rochelle' is the name of a town in south-western France. Both were designed by architect and engineer, W.H. Merritt and constructed by Pepper & Chenowith. Original building plans of La Rochelle show that it was intended to have similar detailing to La Tourelle; however, this was changed in favour of the present Streamline Moderne scheme (BP).

Artist illustration of La Rochelle. Note the low front fence. (Source: The Herald, 23 September 1936, p.24)

A newspaper article described La Rochelle as using the 'Continental style of architecture, with wide balconies, large window areas, and an absence of ornamental detail' and how the architect 'developed the possibilities of the site to the full'. Other features included 'sound-proof' concrete walls and stairs, built in cupboards and a sunken bath and tiled walls in the bathroom, and 'extensive garage accommodation' (*The Herald*, '17 flats replace single residence', 23 September 1936, p.24).

Mr. and Mrs. Renof were members of the local Jewish community. They worshipped at the St Kilda Hebrew Synagogue in Charnwood Crescent, St Kilda, and in November 1935 Rabbi Dangelow consecrated their new home at La Tourelle (*The Australian Jewish Herald*, 21 November 1935, p.7). Mrs. (also known as 'Madame') Louise Renof was a member of the Ladies' Auxiliary of the Synagogue and for several years was President of the National Council of Jewish Women. She regularly hosted meetings and fund-raisers at their home (*The Australian Jewish Herald*, 27 October 1938, p.5).

In 1951 Dr Ernest Fooks designed a small roof top addition for the then owner of the second-floor corner flat, Mrs. J. Weissman. The addition comprised a maid's room and bathroom, which opened on to what was described as an existing roof deck (BP).

W.H. Merritt

W.H. Merritt was an architect and engineer, who was active during the inter-war period and, like many of his peers, his designs from the late 1920s to the early 1930s were in the popular revival styles such as Spanish Mission, Georgian, and Old English/Tudor or English Vernacular. Within Port Phillip, his work is represented by several distinctive flats and houses in St Kilda and Elwood, most of which are of individual heritage significance. Perhaps the best known is the Spanish Mission style Belvedere flats (1929) at 22 The Esplanade, St Kilda, which is included on the Victorian Heritage Register (H812, Citation 324). In that same

year Merritt designed the Old English style Sur La Mer at 25 The Esplanade (Citation 943) just a few doors along from the Belvedere, while two years earlier he was responsible for the Georgian Revival influenced Wyndham at 20 Princes Street (Citation 781).

The construction of two blocks of flats on adjoining sites at the south corner of Dickens Street and Brighton Road in 1935-36 marked a turning point in Merritt's career. The detailing of the first, La Tourelle (1935) at 47A Brighton Road, is varied and reflects the influences of Old English, Moderne and even some references to the Mediterranean-style. It also features a corner tower element that is similar in form to the Belvedere. La Rochelle, built in 1936 on the adjoining site facing Dickens Street, was intended to have similar form and detailing; however, the finished building was instead in the Streamline Moderne style. This became his preferred style for the buildings that followed, which included San Diego, 9A Princes Street (Citation 780) and Valma at 17 Victoria Street (Citation 950) (both in St Kilda and completed in 1936), while the new façade applied to the Victorian terrace houses at 367-368 Beaconsfield Parade, St Kilda when they were converted to flats in 1941 (Significant within HO444 precinct) was in a severe Functionalist style. His own residence at 78 Grange Road, Toorak, constructed c.1940 (part of a duplex and still extant) was also in the Streamline Moderne style.

References

Lewis, Nigel & Aitken, Richard, *City of Malvern Heritage Study. Appendix 1: Architects of Malvern*, 1992

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

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St Kilda Council building permit (BP) nos. 8879, 2 May 1935 (La Tourelle); 9145, 16 December 1935 (La Rochelle); U.1149, 13 July 1951 (La Tourelle)

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 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

La Tourelle

A three-storey, block of inter-war brick flats, at the southwest corner of Brighton Road and Mozart Street. The detailing on La Tourelle is varied and shows the influences of the Old English style and Moderne styles, with accents of the Mediterranean-style, all popular in the inter-war period, and is contemporaneous with La Rochelle, built to its west in Dickens Street. La Tourelle is set back from its street boundaries behind a garden, which has a hedge that extends behind a low random rubble bluestone fence.

A four-storey tower, with a canted form, projects at the northeast corner adjacent to the corner of Brighton Road and Mozart Street. It is a distinct and unusual element in form and detailing and is faced in manganese brickwork. A small projecting balcony, with a wrought iron balustrade, is on the tower's third floor. Above the windows on the top floor of the tower are soldier courses of Roman bricks, and above these are panels of Moderne-style motifs. A wrought iron railing extends around the top of the tower. The main roof of the flats has unglazed terracotta tiles with rendered chimneys.

Above a base of clinker bricks, the walls of the east and north elevations are mostly textured render, apart from the stairwell breakfronts faced in manganese brick that contain the entrances. On the Brighton Road elevation, this bay is located towards the centre, and on the Dickens Street elevation it is at the end. A plain rendered hood projects above each entrance, and the manganese brickwork around the entrances are expressed as Roman bricks, and other bricks have a vermiculated texture. The upper portion of the bays have vertical glazed panels in a tripartite arrangement, and there is a small projecting balcony with a wrought iron railing on the third floor of each bay. The tops of the bays have gabled ends.

On the Dickens Street elevation is another projecting bay, about centre, which is plainer, and is finished in render. It has a gable at top. Windows are mostly timber double-hung sash windows with horizontal glazing bars, in a single or paired arrangement; and Chicago-style window openings on the Brighton Road and Dickens Street elevations adjacent to stairwells. The openable sashes on all windows have horizontal glazing bars. Former recessed balconies at the end of the Brighton Road elevation have been enclosed with glazing.

La Tourelle is in good condition and has a relatively high degree of external intactness.

La Rochelle

A three-storey, block of inter-war flats, designed in a relatively bold Moderne-style. It is contemporary with La Tourelle to its east, which is situated on a more prominent site adjacent to the corner of Brighton Road and Dickens Street. The two demonstrate the array of architectural styles used during the inter-war years by Melbourne architects.

La Rochelle is set back from Dickens Street behind a shallow garden. A random-rubble low bluestone fence along the street boundary is similar to that of La Tourelle. Behind this is a manicured privet hedge, which is a typical interwar planting.

The façade of La Rochelle is asymmetrically composed, with a bay that is off-centre that is clad in Roman bricks (some laid vertically) and set within this bay is a deep and narrow window. This bay contains the stairwell and at the base is a plain glazed door beneath a hood that is the entry to the flats. This bay provides a vertical contrast to what is otherwise a composition with a strong horizontal emphasis, punctuated at each end with sweeping balconies with curved corners. Above the balcony on the top floor is a sweeping hood. Facing the balconies are strips of steel frame windows. Walls of the façade are rendered above a base of Roman bricks.

The east and west elevations have slightly projecting rendered chimneys with corbelling at their base. They are distinct elements, and visually work as bookend-like elements on the composition. The remainder of the east and west elevations are face brick and relatively austere in character.

La Rochelle is in good condition and has a relatively high degree of external intactness.

Comparative analysis

Together, La Tourelle and La Rochelle illustrate competing styles of flat design in the inter-war period, and the evolution of the growing interest and application of Modern design principles by the mid-1930s. They are also representative of the substantial flat complexes, often comprising two or more blocks on a single site built from the 1930s onwards, which demonstrate the boom in flat building following the Great Depression that continued into the post-war period.

Other examples of this trend include Ardoch (developed in stages from c.1922 to c.1938, Citation 403, VHR H969), the series of buildings known as The Atlantic, The Pacific and The Orion (Citations 166 and 167) constructed from 1934 to 1935 on the former St Kilda Town Hall and Court House site at the corner of Barkly and Grey streets, the three-block complex at 109 Nimmo Street, Middle Park (1937, no citation), Glen Eagles, Kinross and Kinfauns at 58-60 Queens Road, Melbourne (Citation 1940-41, 2226), and post-war complexes such as Shirley Court, 20 Shirley Grove, St Kilda East (c.1956-60, Citation 919)

La Tourelle

From the mid-1920s onwards Old English, Spanish Mission and Georgian Revival became the most popular styles for residential architecture in Victoria. As Lewis (1992:1) notes:

The period after the Depression saw a shift towards the new and exciting modern idioms emanating from Europe and America. Nevertheless, period character was not put totally aside. Old English architecture lingered on throughout the 1930s and the Mission and Georgian idioms provided a formal framework through which modernism could be absorbed and modified.

La Tourelle, which blends influences of the English Vernacular Revival and Moderne styles, with some hints of Mediterranean influences, is representative of this trend. A nearby comparison is Zaneth Manor, 33 Brighton Road, designed in 1935 by James H. Wardrop, which is a blend of Old English/Tudor Revival and Moderne massing and detailing (Citation 432).

Other examples include:

- Moira, the house at 16 Glen Eira Road, Ripponlea designed by H.V. Gillespie in 1936 (Citation 1497) which blends the Moderne style overlaid with Mediterranean detailing, demonstrating Gillespie's idiosyncratic design approach.
- El Sonia (1938, designer unknown, Citation 776), 6 Fulton Street, St Kilda East, and Olgmend Court (1940, Leslie J.W. Reed, Citation 402). Both are flats which blend Georgian Revival and Moderne (with Art Deco flourishes at El Sonia).

La Rochelle

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 have a horizontal emphasis, sometimes with an emphatic vertical 'anchor' (often stairwells or chimneys) to provide relief from the horizontality of the composition. Further horizontal lines are often added by parapets (partially concealing the ubiquitous hip roof), and even window mullions. 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, as were Roman bricks, though more avant-garde architects were already turning to cream and apricot bricks by the 1930s. The later or more 'advanced' examples of Streamline Moderne 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).

While La Rochelle lacks the more complex massing seen in some of the other examples such as Avenue Court, Windermere, and Del Marie, its strong horizontal emphasis created by the bold sweeping balconies with curved corners and horizontal bands of steel frame windows that wrap the corners, juxtaposed with the vertical stairwell and chimney elements is nonetheless a fine example of the Streamline Moderne style. Of Merritt's other flats, Valma demonstrates his skill in adapting this style to a very constrained site, while San Diego shows a transition to the more severe International or Functionalist style.

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 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

La Rochelle and bluestone front fence