

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Grosvenor Mansions
Other names: Flats, Chusan Terrace

Citation No:
910



Address: 74-88 William Street, Balaclava

Heritage Precinct: Balaclava Flats Residential

Category: Residential: Flats

Heritage Overlay: **HO7**

Style: Federation/Edwardian: Arts & Crafts

Graded as: Significant

Constructed: 1919

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Designer: Howard R. Lawson

Amendment: TBA

Comment: Revised citation

Significance

What is significant?

Grosvenor Mansions at 74-88 William Street, Balaclava built originally as Chusan Terrace, a row of eight two-storey attached houses constructed c.1885 is of significance to the City of Port Phillip. In 1919, the designer and builder Howard R. Lawson converted the houses to 16 flats, which included significant alterations to the front of the building to add stairs and balconies. In 1976, the eight flats at the north end were converted back to four houses, which resulted in the removal of the external front staircase and other additions. Lawson's remodelling of Chusan Terrace into flats is executed in an Arts & Crafts-style, where the row of houses is divided into two groups, the group at right retains its front stairs added in 1919. Works that removed the other stair, have not disrupted the overall architectural composition of the row of houses to any significant level.

Alterations and additions made after 1920 are not significant.

How is it significant?

Grosvenor Mansions at 74-88 William Street, Balaclava is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Grosvenor Mansions is of historic significance to the City of Port Phillip as an early and representative example of a row of Victorian terrace houses converted to flats. Terraces are a distinctive building type in

St Kilda, and in this example of their conversion to flats demonstrates how increased land values and population growth in the suburb after World War I encouraged the redevelopment of older building stock for denser housing. (Criterion A)

Grosvenor Mansions was one of the first flat developments in St Kilda by Howard R. Lawson, who advertised he was 'the architect who builds'. He was an early and vocal proponent of flat development in Melbourne and would go on to build several blocks in St Kilda, Prahran and South Yarra during the interwar period. Grosvenor Mansions, as an early and representative example of Lawsons flats, predates the better-known collection of flats that he designed and built in the environs of Alexandra Avenue, South Yarra that includes Beverley Hills, one of the best known and finest interwar blocks of flats in Melbourne (Criteria D)

Grosvenor Mansions is of aesthetic significance as a good remodelling of a former row of Victorian terraces into flats in the inter-war period. The architect, Howard R Lawson, completed this remodelling in an Arts & Crafts-style overlaid upon a Classically-style terrace housing form, resulting in a competent architectural composition of elements typical of the Arts & Crafts movement, such as expressive roof forms and half-timbering of gable ends. The composition is also of note for consolidating the row of terraces into two groups of flats, removing the repetition of massing formerly found on the row of terraces. Some discrete elements that remain, such as tripartite windows in places, chimneys, and lower rear wings are of significance in providing physical evidence of the flats Victorian origins. (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

Private development in the City of Port Phillip began from the time of the first sales of Crown land in the 1840s and 1850s. The gradual development of infrastructure, including roads, public transport networks and utilities, paved the way for increasing development of private land. Private subdivision within the broad framework set out by Hoddle's survey saw neighbourhoods in the City of Port Phillip grow into populated, thriving communities.

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:

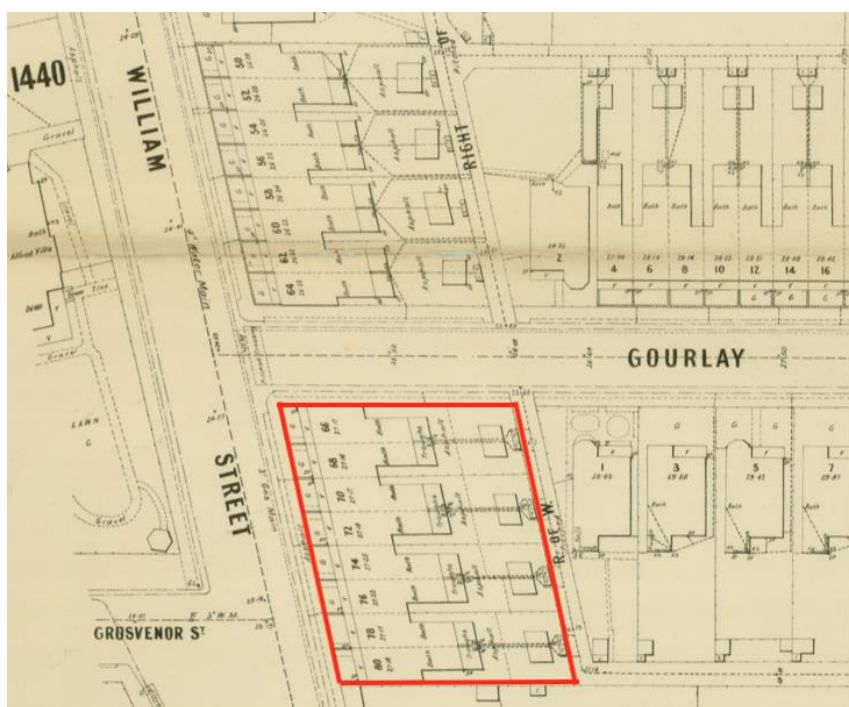
It was held to be no longer necessary to labour with a house and all the domestic drudgery that entailed when by borrowing Continental ideas, people who could afford it could live in flats... Land has become so valuable the villa of the Victorian days, in a crowded thoroughfare, no longer shows anything 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. 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).

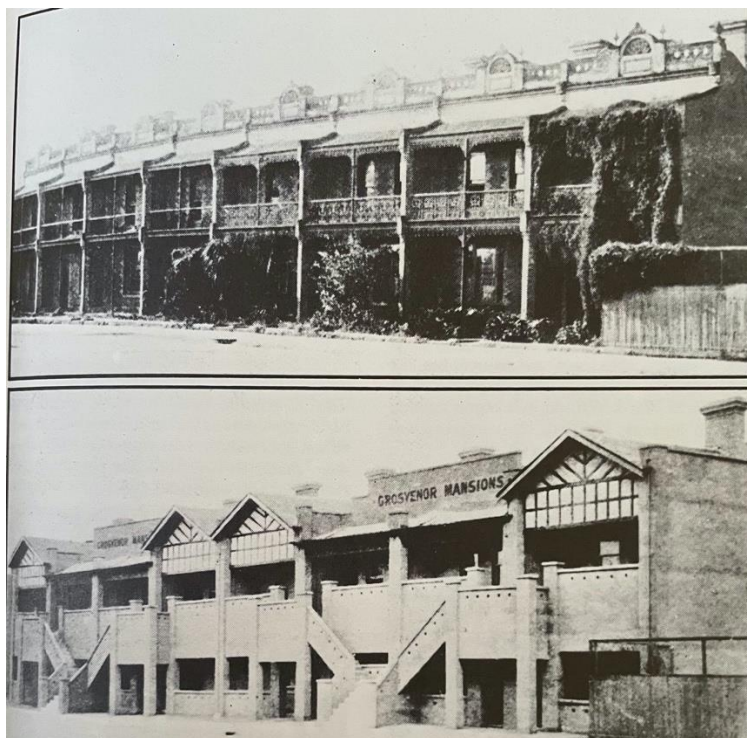
Grosvenor Mansions

Land to the east of the Sandringham Railway in Balaclava was subdivided at the height of the land boom. Gourlay Street was created by a subdivision in 1888 that also created six lots fronting to William Street, three to the north and three to the south of Gourlay Street. In about 1889 two rows of terrace houses, each comprising eight, two-storey houses were built on the allotments – those to the north were known as Aberdeen Terrace, with Chusan Terrace to the south. The architect may have been William Rain who called tenders for a similar terrace of ten houses just around in Gourlay Street (*The Age* 12 November 1889, p.8). In 1891 both terraces were owned by the Victoria Permanent Building Society. The houses are shown on the 1898 Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works plan of this area.



Extract of MMBW Detail Plan no. 1441 showing the terrace houses (Chusan Terrace outlined in red) in 1898

In 1919 the prominent builder and developer, Howard R. Lawson converted the houses into sixteen flats for the owner, J. Reid, which were renamed as Grosvenor Mansions. In 1920 *Real Property Annual* described the result as a 'transformation', and noted the total rent increased from £7 to £24.



Before and after image showing the change: Source *Real Property Annual*, 1920, p.68

In 1976, the eight flats at the northern end were converted back to four two-level houses. The front external stairs were removed, and additions were made at the rear. (BP).

Howard R. Lawson

Howard R. Lawson, who promoted himself as the 'architect who builds', was a prominent and prolific builder of houses and flats in St Kilda in the late 1910s and early 1920s. His early projects in St Kilda include two blocks of flats - 'Wimmera' at 11 Wimmera Place and Clairvaux' at 44 Blessington Street (both 1917) – and Grosvenor Mansions the conversion of a terrace row of eight houses into sixteen flats at 74-88 William Street, Balaclava (1918-19). He also designed and built at least twelve houses or flats in Dandenong Road alone by 1919 including his own residence Broxton at no. 342, and the two adjoining houses at nos. 344 and 346. By the early 1920s he had turned his attention to South Yarra where he designed and built several large, highly visible blocks of flats that occupy much of the entire large block of Alexandra Avenue, Darling Street, Domain Road and Punt Road. The earlier blocks were in the Arts & Crafts/Bungalow style, while the later blocks are Spanish Mission-influenced including what is perhaps his best-known work, Beverley Hills.

Lawson's houses and flats in St Kilda are characterised by Arts & Crafts and Bungalow materials, form and detailing including roughcast and shingled walls and low-pitched gabled roofs with wide eaves. Lawson also developed what he termed his own distinctive 'Manhattan Bungalow' style, which is characterised by features such as shingled curved bay windows (often extending up to three levels as at Wimmera), bracketed eaves and recessed sleepout balconies. These features are all used in the in house at 346 Dandenong Road, an illustration of which was featured in an article about Mr Lawson in the 1919 edition of *Real Property Annual* as an 'Example of Manhattan Bungalow typical of Mr Howard R Lawson's work'.

References

Land Victoria (LV) LP 1630

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) Detail Plan no.1441, dated 1898

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. 3900, 10 June 1919; 6051, 7 July 1976

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1920, 1925, 1930

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 row of former Victorian terrace housing, remodelled into flats in the early twentieth century in an Arts & Crafts-inspired style. The building is situated at the southeast corner of William and Gourlay Streets, opposite the intersection of William and Grosvenor Streets, closing the vista along the latter when looking east once passing through the Melbourne to Sandringham Railway Line underpass.

Grosvenor Mansions can be divided into two sub-groups, each with a stepped parapet with *Grosvenor Mansions* in rendered signage, flanked by projecting bays with gable fronted roofs with timber-lined eaves and half-timbering in the gable ends framed by capped piers. Balconies extend along the fronts, their cast iron replaced with roughcast rendered masonry balustrades with small square openings, and timber shingles in place of the cast iron frieze to the group at right. The group of four former terraces at right have been subdivided into flats on each level, which are accessed by a split central stair, and there is a low rendered front fence with capped piers. The other group of four were originally the same, but the stairs have been removed and they have reverted to a two-storey Victorian terrace typology in terms of planning.

Evidence of the building's Victorian origins are evident in some remaining fabric, which include on the ground floor the tripartite windows facing the verandah; and at the rear, where the lower gable roof rear wings remain in pairs, and chimneys with Classical mouldings.

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

Comparative analysis

As a nineteenth century terrace row converted to flats in the early twentieth century, 'Hilda Terrace' is representative of a distinctive St Kilda building type. 'Conversions' were among the earliest flat types to emerge in Port Phillip and according to Sawyer (1982:61) the poor quality of some brought flats 'into disrepute'. Sawyer cites a 1923 *Australian Home Builder* article that was highly critical of the practice:

Take any old house, dress up the front with a coat of roughcast and an outside staircase; insert a bathroom and lavatory somewhere on the upper floors, also a stove and a sink. If there is room at the back, add a back verandah – platform rather – to the upper floor...

However, at the other end of the scale there were also a number of conversions of exceptional quality such as the 1911 transformation of the former *Cliveden* in East Melbourne into *Cliveden Mansion Flats*. Many of these transformative conversions were designed by architects.

Port Phillip has examples of both types of conversions. One of the earliest examples of a terrace row conversion is Marli Place, 3-7 The Esplanade, St Kilda, which was converted to flats around 1911 (Significant within HO5). This is an example of a basic conversion with prominent external staircases being the most visible change. Otherwise the terrace largely retains its mid-Victorian character.

Perhaps the best architect-designed terrace conversion in Port Phillip is Carnong Courts (c.1858 terrace row, 1926 conversion, plans prepared by A & K Henderson) at 29-33 Robe Street, St Kilda (Citation 794). Also in the Arts & Crafts style, Carnong Courts is notable for the arrangement of semi-enclosed stairwell towers at the front of the building as an integral and distinctive part of the design. Grosvenor Mansions is comparable to Carnong Courts in terms of the degree of transformation but is a less sophisticated design. The Arts & Crafts form and detailing is characteristic of Lawson's other early flats in St Kilda.

Other comparisons include Hilda Terrace, later Duband Court flats, 28-36 Alma Road, St Kilda a c.1870 terrace row converted to flats to a design by Harry R. Johnson architect in 1926 (like the northern section of Grosvenor Mansions, it has since been converted back to single residences, Citation 397), St Margaret's Mansions, 25 Dalgety Street, St Kilda (c.1862, 1925 conversion by B.S.W. Gilbertson, Citation 883), and Hampden, 74 Barkly Street, St Kilda (c.1870, 1919 conversion by Arthur Plaisted).

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

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



