

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Southey Gardens
Other names: Milton Drive Flats (former)

Citation No:
920



Address: 2 Southey Grove, Elwood

Category: Residential: Flats

Style: Postwar: Modernist

Constructed: 1957

Designer: The office of Theodore Berman

Amendment: C29

Comment: Revised citation

Heritage Precinct: St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs

Heritage Overlay: TBC

Graded as: Significant

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Significance

What is significant?

Southey Gardens, formerly Milton Drive Flats, at 2 Southey Grove, Elwood, designed by the office of Theodore Berman in 1957, is significant.

The contributory components include the west, south and east wings comprised of single storey modest, co-joined units arranged around a communal garden/motor court. Privacy is created by the entry brick wall (overpainted) and the long blank, side cream brick wall of one of the units. The roofs are long skillions, clad in profiled sheet metal with timber fascia and wide soffit. The walls are stretcher bond with the original sections having been painted and the additions in either cream or red brick. The unpainted brick sections are blank and extend the full width of the roof – cream to the short (west and east wings) and red to the longer south wing in addition to the north end of the east wing (in cream brick). The overpainted sections are recessed with cream or red brick sills. The original doors are recessed beneath the verandah and have a highlight window and there are flanking original timber-framed windows, which are narrow (vertically orientated) with double hung sashes.

The much altered north wing and alterations and additions to the other wings are not significant.

How is it significant?

Southey Gardens at 2 Southey Grove, Elwood is of local historical and representative significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Southey Gardens is historically significant as being demonstrative of the extensive multi-residential building that characterised much of the 20th century history of the municipality but especially the southern parts and which gained pace after World War II. The typology evolved with the work of several émigré architects, who were responsible for a high proportion of the architect-designed examples, imbuing the area with a more progressive, international character. This complex however was designed by an architect, Theodore Berman, or his office, whose parents were Polish émigrés and was responsible for other notable buildings in the municipality. (Criterion A)

Southey Gardens is of representative significance as a postwar example of the less common 'Bungalow Court' type, comprised of individual single level flats in a courtyard plan with a mixture of private and shared open space and facilities. This type evolved to become a socially acceptable alternative to multi-level flats in middle ring suburbs such as Hawthorn, Malvern and Brighton, but was much less popular in inner city areas where higher land values required higher site yields - this is the only known early postwar example in St Kilda or Elwood. It is unusual in that is single storey whereas the multi-residential buildings constructed in the area after World War II are otherwise multi-storied, generally with either a flat or hipped roof, rather than a skillion roof form. The complex demonstrates the increased importance placed on car parking in post-war examples. (Criterion D)

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 (Prahman 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).

Another boom in flat-building began in the mid-1950s. This was fuelled by population growth and a housing shortage after World War II, changes to building codes and the introduction of company title (and later stratum and strata-title) that enabled flats to be sold individually as 'own your own' units. Between 1961 and 1971, flats increased from 38% to 62% of all dwellings in St Kilda. The boom in flat building saw St Kilda's population increase by 10,000 people at a time when the populations of other inner-city suburbs were declining (TEH).

Southey Gardens (former Milton Drive Flats)

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. 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 built here toward the end of World War I. These included Clarendon, designed by Joseph Plottel and built in 1915 at 26-28 Blessington Street, and two blocks by Howard Lawson at 44 (Clairvaux) and 46 Blessington Street, built 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). The area further south was less undeveloped one of the few houses was at the southwest corner of Milton Street on the site of the present flats (see Figure 1).

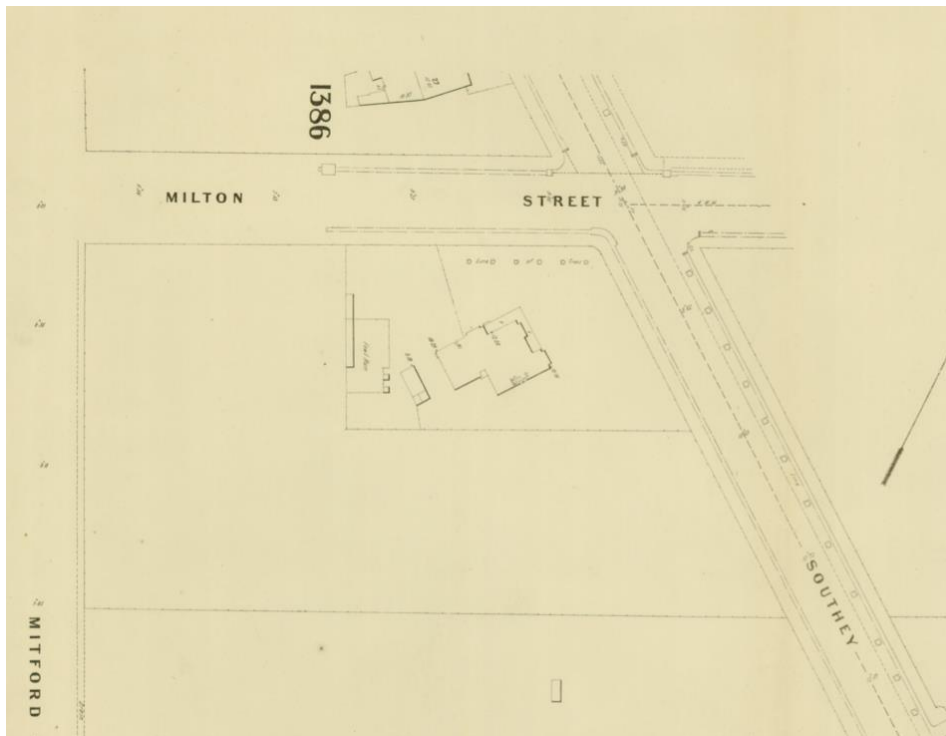


Figure 1: MMBW Detail Plan No.1394, showing the house on the subject site in 1905

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.

In the early twentieth century the grounds of the house at the southwest corner of Southey and Milton streets were progressively subdivided creating building allotments facing both streets, which were developed with flats and houses. The original house remained, accessed by a driveway leading off Southey Street, until the 1950s when it was purchased by Theodore Berman, an architect.

Berman demolished the house and his architectural office designed a complex of 24 studio/bedsit flats arranged in a square around a central courtyard containing carparking (see Figure 2). The complex, which cost approximately £26,000, was constructed by sub-contractors under the supervision of Berman (BP). In 1960, the complex was listed in the Directory as the Milton Drive Flats at 27 Southey Street, Elwood (SM).

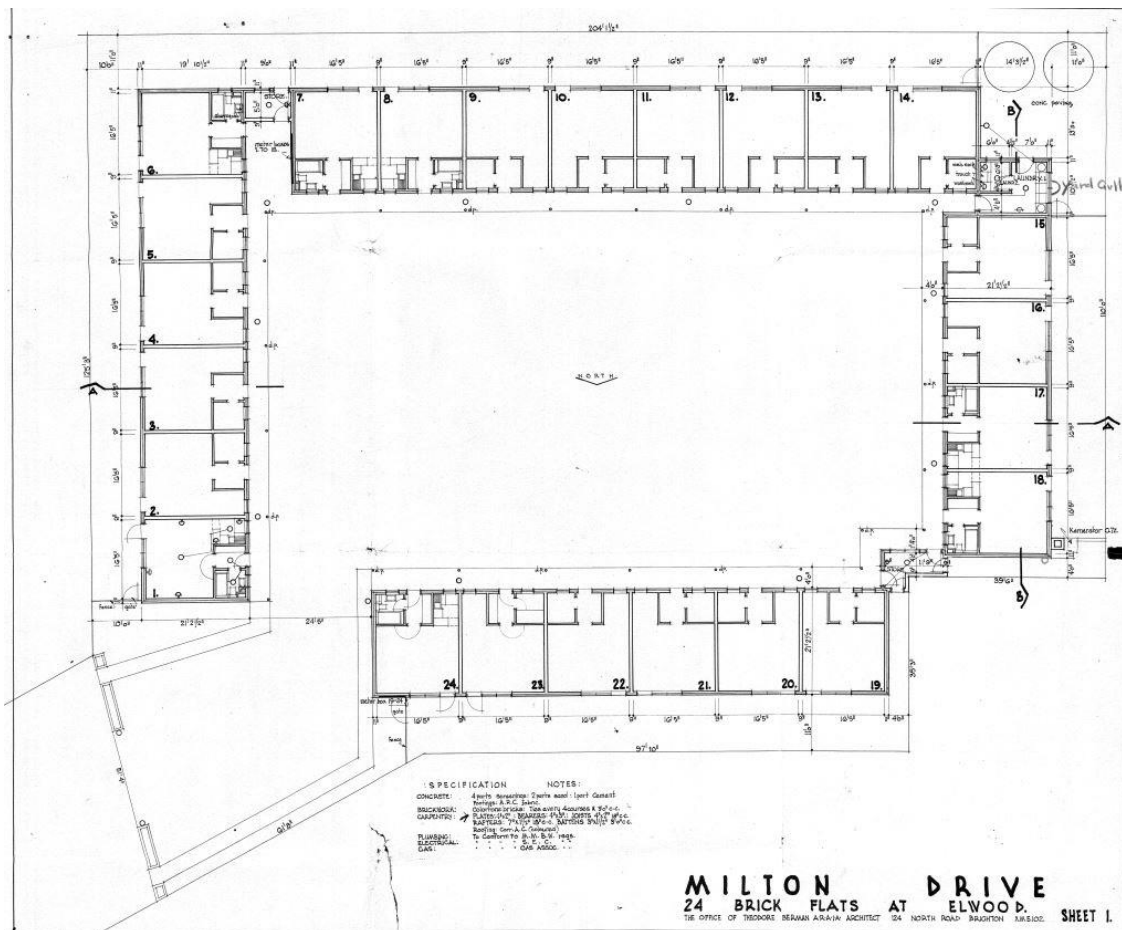


Figure 2: Original layout plan (Source: City of Port Phillip Building Archives)

In the late twentieth century the complex was purchased by the Department of Human Services for older persons accommodation, and alterations and additions were made in 2000 to provide additional living space for the units (BP). The 24 bedsits were extended and modified to provide increased living space and bigger bathrooms. It has been renamed 'Southey Gardens'.



Figure 3 - The flats c.1990s prior to the alterations carried out in 2000 (Source: City of Port Phillip)

Theodore Berman

Born in Carlton in 1928, Theodore Tolly Berman was a second-generation Polish migrant whose parents, David Berman and the former Freda Waxman were both born in Warsaw (Built Heritage).

Registered as an architect in 1954, Berman established private practice under his own name. Initially, this output focussed on small-scale apartment developments, mostly in the inner southern suburbs near where he lived (in Elwood and later in Brighton) as well as retail fitouts. The latter projects saw him become regular architect to several leading clothes chains including Beverley Lee Knitwear, Portmans and Sussan Lingerie. Around 1957, Berman transferred his home-based practice to larger office premises in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, where he was able to take on additional staff (Built Heritage).

In the 1960s Berman designed several bowling alleys, as well as motels for the Parkroyal Chain, and in the 1970s was commissioned as the architect for high-end residential projects in Toorak (Built Heritage).

References

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, "Theodore Berman", *Dictionary of Unsung Architects*, www.builtheritage.com.au (viewed 24 November 2021)

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) detail plan no. 1394 (1905)

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

Peterson, Richard (2009, 2nd ed. [2005]), 'Edgewater Towers' (chpt. 43) in *A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and their people* (RP)

Port Phillip Thematic Environmental History (TEH), February 2021

St Kilda Council building permit (BP) no. U.3087, 31 January 1957; B1393/1999/P/0-02 (1999 alterations and additions)

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1960-1965

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

An enclave of single storey modest, co-joined units in a D-shaped plan arranged around a communal garden/motor court. Privacy is created by the entry brick wall (overpainted) and the long blank, side cream brick wall of one of the units.

The intactness of the four wings varies, with those to the west, south and east being mostly intact whereas the northern wing has undergone greater change.

The more intact wings (west, south and east) have long skillion roofs, clad in profiled sheet metal with timber fascia and wide soffit. Aerials reveal a regular configuration of skylights and flues. The walls are stretcher bond with the original sections having been painted and the additions in either cream or red brick. The unpainted brick sections are blank and extend the full width of the roof – cream to the short (west and east wings) and red to the longer south wing in addition to the north end of the east wing (in cream brick). The overpainted sections are recessed with cream or red brick sills. The original doors are recessed beneath the verandah and have a highlight window and there are flanking original timber-framed windows, which are narrow (vertically orientated) with double hung sashes.

The north wing has a hipped roof with some gable ends and new sections of wall are red brick with cream brick sills. The new windows are wider/larger either sashes or in a combination with a fixed pane.

Comparative analysis

The subject complex is unusual in that it is single storey whereas the multi-residential buildings constructed in the area after World War II are otherwise multi-storied, generally with either a flat or hipped roof, rather than a skillion roof form. A few of the comparators are also arranged about a garden area or a central courtyard.

Bungalow Court and courtyard flats

As an epicentre for apartment development from the 1910s until the 1970s, St Kilda and Elwood contain many blocks of flats, which demonstrate the evolution of styles and types and the growing popularity of flat living. During the Inter-war period, the most common type was conventional walk-up flats of two or three storeys. Blocks of flats in a courtyard development were less common, while courtyard developments of single-storey units (the so-called 'Bungalow Court' type) were rarer still.

According to Sawyer (1992:13-4) the shortage of houses and the desire for smaller, more manageable homes had been a factor in the development of flats, but the continual concern with privacy and the unsuitability of flats for families led developers to seek alternatives. One of these was the 'Bungalow Court' concept, which was introduced as early as 1916 when it was described in an article in the *Real Property Annual*. The one and two roomed units were grouped around a U-shaped courtyard in pairs with no fences or hedges between them. However, Sawyer (1992:14) concludes that 'the old concern with lack of privacy once again surfaced and the concept does not appear to have gained a ready acceptance in Australia at this time'. Nonetheless, the 'Bungalow Court' concept did eventually evolve into the courtyard flat types, where flats were grouped around a semi-enclosed garden court, which emerged by the 1930s.

In Port Phillip, Greycourt at 96 Grey Street, St Kilda (see Citation 2002) designed by Richardson and Wood and constructed in 1920 is one of two 'Bungalow Court' examples cited by Sawyer and is the earliest known example in Port Phillip (and, by extension, the metropolitan area). The other is 45 Jackson Street, St Kilda, which (as Sawyer notes) doesn't really fit the type, as it comprises a rectangular block with no courtyard. A better example is 27-29 Jackson Street, which comprises attached dwellings in a U-shape around a central garden courtyard. Both Jackson Street developments date from the early 1930s and are within the HO5 St Kilda Hill precinct. Another later example is Cromer Court, 22-24 Kingsley Street, Elwood constructed in 1940-41 (Citation 2347).

Milton Drive demonstrates how the Bungalow Court type was adapted in the postwar period. While the basic principles remained the same, a key change was the use of the central courtyard for car parking. While less popular in inner city areas such as St Kilda where higher land values required higher site yields (this is the only known early post-war example in St Kilda or Elwood; all other flats from this period being the more common two and three storey walk-ups), single storey 'villa unit' courtyard developments became popular in middle ring suburbs such as Hawthorn, Malvern and Brighton as socially acceptable alternatives to multi-level flats.

Postwar Modernist flats

There is a relatively high concentration of architect-designed flats in the Elwood and St Kilda area which are typically either finely detailed and/or distinguished by their site responsiveness. Several émigré architects were active and at the forefront of the evolution of this building type including Mordecai Benshemesh, Michael R.E. Feldhagen, Dr Ernest Fooks, and Kurt Popper, often working for Jewish clients and accommodating the influx of Central and Eastern European Jewish refugees who were accustomed to apartment living. In addition, several Australian-born architects were responsible for flats but rarely multiple examples. An exception was Theodore Berman, a second-generation Polish migrant who was born in Carlton in 1928.

The subject complex is indicative of the approach that evolved during the end of the Postwar period – circa mid to late 1950s/early 1960s. Moving further into the 1960s, there was a shift to what is often defined as the late 20th century period, when the influence of Brutalism becomes apparent in the bolder forms and use

of brown brick. Although cream brick was also common during the earlier phase of the Postwar period, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, a Functionalist mode held sway at that time with parapets and steel-framed windows. From about the mid-1950s, whilst roofs were typically flat, they were usually expressed with soffits, often deep, and openings were typically timber-framed.

This is one of three known examples of multi-residential buildings in Port Phillip designed by Theodore Berman or by his office. The others are:

- Rocklea Gardens, 46-50 Hotham Street, St Kilda East, 1960 (Citation 2017, HO293). Very large complex with a T-plan over three levels. International style, continuous band of timber-framed windows/openings with balconies, and spandrel panels at either end of the elongated façade.
- Flats, 76 Mitford Street, Elwood 1957 (Contributory within the St Kilda Botanical Gardens & Environs Precinct). Two storey block, cuboid form with flat projecting roof over galleries, mainly cream brick. Façade with concrete brick, two colours (dark grey to main wall and light grey to screen wall) and varying bond (stacked and stretcher), metal pole screen with '76', metal balustrades with diamond motifs to front, though triangular to long side galleries. Timber-framed windows including large window wall section to facade.

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 as a Significant place.

Primary source

RBA Architects & Conservation Consultants, *HO7 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct Heritage Review Stage 2*, 2021

Other sources

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

Other images



Left – entry to the complex. Right: The east wing showing the 2000 additions at left with square window and the projecting bays beneath the roof.



Left: View of the central car park. Right: The altered north wing showing the non-original gables, and brick additions