

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: House and air raid shelter
Other names: -

Citation No:
2450



Address: 23 Mitford Street, St Kilda

Heritage Precinct: St Kilda
Botanical Gardens & Environs

Category: Residential: House

Heritage Overlay: HO368

Style: Interwar: American Bungalow

Graded as: Significant

Constructed: 1921, 1941

Victorian Heritage Register: Yes – H616

Designer: Edwin J. & C Ruck (house and fence), David V. Isaacs (air raid shelter)

Amendment: TBA

Comment: Revised citation

Significance

The house and former air raid shelter at 23 Mitford Street, St Kilda is included on the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR H616) as a place of State significance. Please refer to the VHR citation for the statement of significance. The local statement of significance is as follows:

What is significant?

The house designed in 1921 by Edwin J. Ruck and the air raid shelter designed in 1941 by David V. Isaacs at 23 Mitford Street, St Kilda are significant. The front fence also contributes to the significance of the place.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

The house, front fence and air raid shelter are of local historic and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

The air raid shelter is of historic significance as a rare and early example, which demonstrates the precautions taken by private citizens at a time of heightened threat and fear of invasion by Japan during the early part of World War Two. It is one of only two known surviving air raid shelters in Port Phillip. (Criteria A & B)

The house is of aesthetic significance as a substantial and well-detailed example of a Californian Bungalow in a garden setting, which is complemented by an original front fence. Notable features include the arched front porch with corner buttresses and an arched entry door with sidelights containing leadlight glass and a label mould above. (Criterion E)

The place is associated with the Sicree family who lived in the house for over 60 years, constructed the air raid shelter, and were prominent within the local Jewish community. (Criterion H)

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 (5.3.3 Suburban bungalows)

7. Governing: 7.3 Defending the nation

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.

Significant population growth after World War I created a demand for housing, leading to the subdivision (or re-subdivision) of the remaining pockets of vacant or underdeveloped land in the City of Port Phillip. This included vacant land previously thought to be unsuitable for housing, such as in Fishermans Bend, as well as the re-development of the remaining mansion estates. Apart from the mansion estate subdivisions, there were two major interwar subdivisions at either end of the City of Port Phillip: The Garden City estates in Port Melbourne and the Brunnings Estate subdivision in Ripponlea.

The entry of Japan into World War II following the invasion of Pearl Harbour in December 1941 dramatically increased the threat to Australia. Fears of an invasion intensified and the attacks by Japan on Darwin in February 1942 and Sydney and Newcastle in late May and early June of that year exposed Australia's vulnerability. After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941, slit trenches were frantically dug across the suburbs of Melbourne to provide residents with shelter in the event of Australia being bombed. In Hester Reserve, Port Melbourne two trenches were dug and lined with timber. The students in Nott Street Primary school used them for practice. Residents also excavated their own home air raid shelters.

House and air raid shelter, 23 Mitford Street

The following summary history is from the Heritage Victoria citation:

The Californian bungalow residence at 23 Mitford Street was constructed in 1921 by the original owner, Benjamin Davis, and designed by architects Edwin and C.L. Ruck. The concrete air raid shelter, located in the large back garden of the Sicree family home, was constructed in early 1941.

Henrietta and Harry Sicree and their family took up residency at the substantial 1921 Californian Bungalow in St Kilda in 1927. The family had a long connection with the house, with brothers Abraham and Lazarus continuing to reside there following their father's death in 1944. In 1946, businessman Abraham Sicree established the Lazarus

and Abraham Sicree Chair of Semitic Studies at the University of Melbourne, and was prominent member of the local Jewish community. Lazarus Sicree and his wife constructed the concrete air raid shelter in 1941. The shelter took the place of the Sicree's tennis court in their extensive backyard, as concerns about potential air raids heightened over the course of the war.

The shelter was designed by David V Isaacs, a consulting engineer, in December 1940. Isaacs was a member of a sub-committee formed by the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects and the Institution of Engineers, Australia, Melbourne division. The two bodies had been asked to prepare a series of reports to the State Emergency Council for Civil Defence early in 1940. The Pollard Brothers began building the shelter in February 1941. Its date is comparatively early, as shelters were more commonly constructed by citizens in the back yards after 1941. Though the public was made aware of the danger of air attacks following outbreak of war in 1939, it was not until late in 1941 that the threat of the Japanese in the Pacific prompted 'brownout' simulations and the allocation of federal funding increased the construction of shelters.

In an era when many private shelters were shallow trenches covered in corrugated iron, the Sicree family concrete bunker is an unusually substantial structure. It also provided a relatively high level of comfort with bunks, toilet compartment with escape hatch, hand basin and benches provided for its few occupants. The reinforced concrete walls, floor and barrel vaulted roof were 12 inches thick and unusually, the concrete roof remained exposed. The sophisticated design suggests a British influence. It was later shown, however, that the extra effort and cost of elaborate subterranean concrete shelters was not justified by an improvement in protection.

In 2014 a multi-unit residential building was constructed at the rear of the house above and around the air raid shelter, which has been retained within the basement structure of the building (PP).

References

Apperly, R., Irving, P & Reynolds, P., *A pictorial guide to identifying Australian architecture. Styles and terms from 1788 to the present*, 1994

Heath, Sally, 'Seeing out the bombs in style', *Emerald Hill, Sandridge and St Kilda Times*, 7 May 1987

Heritage Victoria, H616 'Residence and air raid shelter' Citation

Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW Plan No. 1418, dated 1901

Port Phillip Thematic Environmental History (THE) **Version 1, July 2020**

St Kilda City Council building permits (BP) nos. 4570, 9 August 1921 (house); 10739, 13 February 1941 (air raid shelter)

St Kilda City Council minutes, 10 February 1941

St Kilda City Council planning permit (PP) 1053/2010/A

St. Kilda Rate Books (RB) 1915-21, 1925-26, 1935-36. VPRS 8816/PI, PROV.

Sands & McDougall Directory (SM) 1925, 1930

Description

The house at 23 Mitford Street is a substantial California Bungalow within a garden setting. Characteristic of the style it is constructed of red brick with roughcast render and has a dominant terracotta tiled gabled roof with deep bracketed eaves, and projecting gables to the front, one of which contains the porch. The tall brick chimneys have terracotta pots. Notable features include the wide arched opening to the porch, which has corner buttresses, and the arched entry door with sidelights that contain leadlight and stained glass, which leads to a wide, wood panelled entrance hallway. Internally, two hallways lead to bedrooms, a bathroom, and the kitchen, which retains early tiling and openings. The dining room and lounge room feature original ceiling decoration and tiled fireplaces (Heritage Victoria).

The house has very high integrity and is complemented by an original front fence constructed of red brick with rendering caps and coping, and metal balustrades and gates.

At the rear of the house is a multi-unit residential building, which has been built over and around the original air raid shelter, which is now contained within the basement of the building. The air raid shelter is a barrel vaulted reinforced concrete structure measuring 9.4 metres (31 feet) long and 2.1 metres (7 feet) high to the top of the semi-circular ceiling. When it was inspected in 1992 there were air locks at each end, one to the main entry at the foot of the stairs, and an escape hatch in the toilet compartment at the other. There were three pairs of bunks down one side, each with its own ladder. On the other side was a hand basin and two folding benches. At the time the shelter contained 'all equipment including tins for supplies'.

Comparative analysis

There is only one other known surviving example of an air raid shelter in Port Phillip, which survives as a cellar beneath the house at 28 Lansdowne Road, St Kilda East. Ballantyne & Wilson architects designed this air raid shelter in February 1942 for then owner Mrs. E.W. Leone (SKCC building permit 10963, 10 February 1942). A building permit was issued for another air raid shelter at 36 Tennyson Street in 1942, designed by W.H. Merritt. However, it is unknown whether this was built and, if it was, whether it still survives (SKCC building permit 10957, 9 January 1942).

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.

Primary source

City of Port Phillip, *H07 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations*, 2022

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



Undated image of air raid shelter prior to construction of multi-unit residential building, which enveloped it. (Source: Heritage Victoria)

