

# City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

**Place name:** Clairvaux  
**Other names:** Flats

**Citation No:**  
425



**Address:** 44 & 46 Blessington Street,  
St Kilda

**Heritage Precinct:** St Kilda  
Botanical Gardens & Environs

**Category:** Residential: Flats

**Heritage Overlay:** HO7

**Style:** Federation/Edwardian:  
Arts & Crafts

**Graded as:** Significant

**Constructed:** 1917

**Victorian Heritage Register:** No

**Designer:** Howard R. Lawson

**Amendment:** TBA

**Comment:** Revised citation

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## Significance

### *What is significant?*

The duplex Clairvaux and the adjoining flats, both designed in 1917 by Howard R. Lawson at 44 and 46 Blessington Street, St Kilda are significant. The low brick front fences also contribute to the significance of the place.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

### *How is it significant?*

Clairvaux and the flats at 44 and 46 Blessington Street, St Kilda is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

### *Why is it significant?*

They are historically significant as early blocks of flats in St Kilda, designed and constructed by Howard R. Lawson who was a pioneer and advocate of flat development in Melbourne, and which were part of the first wave of flat development in suburban Melbourne in the decade prior to 1920. St Kilda, with its access to gardens and the foreshore, and proximity to public transport, shopping and services, was a popular location and became the epicentre of flat building in Melbourne in the early to mid-twentieth century. (Criterion A)

They are of representative significance as early flats, which demonstrate the development of flat design in Melbourne and the alternative approach to access using either external or internal stairs. Of note is the

provision of external balconies with direct access to all flats. The flats at no.46 are also of interest for their terrace house form, built boundary to boundary to maximise site coverage. (Criterion D)

Clairvaux of aesthetic significance of flats in the Arts & Crafts style, with distinctive materials and detailing (some of which are Lawson's own trademarks) including the shingled corner window bay, the projecting balcony with a shingled balustrade and a flat roof with exposed rafter tails supported by capped brick piers with timber posts, and the brick chimneys with projecting brick ends forming simple patterns. They are complemented by the adjoining flats, which share some materials and details, and the continuous front brick fence, which unifies the two buildings. (Criterion E)

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## 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)

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## 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 (Pahran 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).

### Clairvaux and flats, 44 & 46 Blessington Street

The area surrounding the St Kilda Botanical Gardens, particularly the streets with direct views over the gardens, 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. Clarendon, at 26 Blessington Street, was the first flats in this area and was built in 1915 just one year after The Canterbury at 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda, which is generally acknowledged to be the first purpose-built residential flats in Port Phillip (see Comparative Analysis).

Howard R. Lawson designed and built the duplex, Clairvaux, at 44 Blessington Street and the adjoining four flats at no.46 in 1917. Clairvaux was built for a Miss Scott, and the adjoining flats were commissioned by Mrs. Blair. The building permits were issued on the same day (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. He was a pioneer and advocate of flat development and built some of the first flats in St Kilda including at least four in 1917: Clairvaux (44 Blessington Street), four flats at 46 Blessington Street, Carlyle (12 Carlisle Street) and Wimmera (11 Wimmera Place). His other known early flat developments include:

- 1918 – Four flats at 1A Pilley Street, St Kilda East. Situated on the east corner of Dandenong Road, this was among no fewer than twelve houses and flat buildings that Lawson would design and construct from 1918 to 1920 along the boulevard, which included his own residence Broxton at no.342, and the adjoining houses at nos. 344 and 346.
- 1918 – Flats, 92 Carlisle Street, St Kilda (demolished 2020).
- 1918-19 - Grosvenor Mansions, the conversion of a Victorian terrace row of eight houses into sixteen flats at 74-88 William Street, Balclava,
- 1919 – First stage of Dalgety Court at 43 Dalgety Street, St Kilda (second stage 1936).
- c.1925 – Bilston Flats, a mixed use development with shops at ground floor and flats above at 132-134 Carlisle Street, St Kilda.

By the early 1920s he had turned his attention to South Yarra where he and his family designed and built several large, highly visible blocks of flats that occupy much of the large block of Alexandra Avenue, Darling Street, Domain Road and Punt Road.

The houses and flats built up to the early 1920s were in the Arts & Crafts/Bungalow style, while the later South Yarra blocks are mostly Spanish Mission-influenced including what is perhaps his best-known work, Beverley Hills.

### References

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 permits (BP): 3411, 29 August 1917 (Clairvaux, 44 Blessington St); and 3412, 29 August 1917 (46 Blessington St)

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1920, 1925

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

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## Description

Clairvaux is a block of duplex flats showing the influence of the Arts & Crafts style. Constructed of red brick it has a gabled terracotta tile roof and is built to the boundary on the east side. Typical of early flats, it has an external stair, which has a brick balustrade with rounded brick coping and vertical slots. Distinctive features including the circular bay window clad in shingles above and below the timber sash windows, which have diamond leadlights, and the projecting balcony with a shingled balustrade and a flat roof with exposed rafter tails. The corner bay window, and balcony piers, which comprise capped brick piers with timber posts at the top, and the brick chimneys with projecting brick ends forming simple patterns are trademarks of early flats by Lawson.

The distinctive brick chimneys are seen in the adjoining block at no.46. Built from boundary to boundary with a transverse terracotta tile, this adopts an almost terrace house arrangement with two flats on each level on either side of a central stairwell, which is entered via paired timber doors with multi-pane windows. Pilasters (with the same distinct detailing as the piers to the balcony at Clairvaux) divide the façade into four bays. The ground floor flats have balconies with arched openings and brick balustrades with regular square openings, which are accessed by timber door with a multi pane window flanked by windows with 12-pane upper sash. The first floor balconies have rectangular openings, now glazed in.

A brick fence across the front of both flats has expressed piers and balustrades with regular square openings.

The buildings are in good condition and have a high degree of external integrity.

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## Comparative analysis

'The Canterbury', built in two stages in 1914 and 1919, at 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda is generally acknowledged to be the first purpose-built residential flats in Port Phillip, and one of the earliest in Melbourne. While the 'Majestic Mansions' in Fitzroy Street was completed two years earlier, not all of the residences in that building were fully self-contained. Stylistically, early flats in Port Phillip broadly fit into one of two types: Arts & Crafts, and Freestyle.

The Arts & Crafts style is characterized by features including the use of contrasting textures and materials on facades (such as facebrick, roughcast render, timber shingles and brackets to gables); entrance porches beneath the main roof supported on heavy battered piers or paired timber posts or columns resting on low piers; simple, geometric decoration created by projecting bricks or small voids (e.g., hit and miss brick walls); box windows (with timber frames that project from the wall, resting on timber or brick corbels) and semi-circular windows and openings.

There are many examples of Arts & Crafts style flats in St Kilda, several of which were designed by the prominent designer/builder Howard R. Lawson such as Wimmera (1917) and Clairvaux (1917). Biltmore (Dunlop & Hunt, 1922-23), which is included on the Victorian Heritage Register, is another fine Arts & Crafts design with Oriental influences.

The design of Clairvaux also demonstrates early approaches to flat design in Melbourne. Many early flat developments were created as the conversion of an existing house or houses, and the easiest way to provide access to first floor flats was to build an external stair. This design feature was used on some early flats as it had the advantage of being entirely independent of the internal plan of the flat, but it also had the considerable disadvantage of offering no protection from the weather. Consequently, external staircases became associated with poor quality flats and so the approach taken with some early flats was to make the stairwell an integrated part of the design and as inconspicuous as possible (Sawyer 1982:55). This is demonstrated at Clarendon where the stairwell has been carefully integrated into the main elevation. Lawson's flats include both approaches as demonstrated here, where Clairvaux has an open stair, while no.46 has a fully enclosed central stairwell.

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The provision of private balconies to all flats in these blocks is also a notable feature. 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 a common criticism of early flat developments was the poor relationship of the building to its external space, a lack of privacy and the unsuitability of flats for families. In many early flat developments, the site coverage was very high, and the open space left over was not integrated with the building and of little practical use. In 1922 architect James H. Wardrop, a proponent of flat development argued that aggregation of open spaces in flat developments would provide ‘... a decent breathing space’ when compared with the ‘mean yard space’ available to the conventional small cottage (Sawyer 1982:83).

Despite this, very few early flat developments provided dedicated open space for each unit. While there were exceptions (Lawson’s Wimmera also each have a dedicated balcony), most early blocks did not, and it was not until the post-war period that flats were more commonly provided with their own balconies or private open space.

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## 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.

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## Recommendations

Retain in the Heritage Overlay with external paint controls.

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## Primary source

David Helms, *H07 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations*, 2022

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## Other images

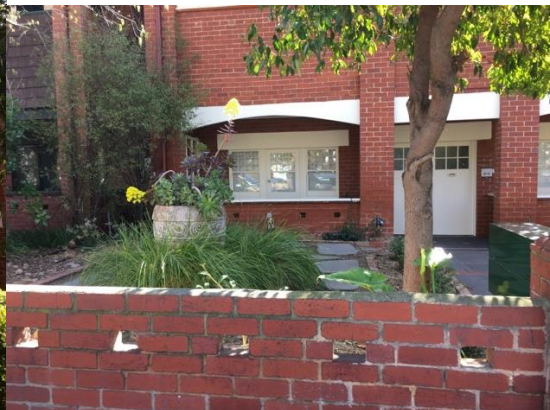


Clairvaux (at left) and 46 Blessington Street





*Clairvaux showing part of front fence and timber gate*



*46 Blessington Street.*



*Front fence*