

City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

Place name: Keith Court
Other names: Flats

Citation No:
431



Address: 27 Brighton Road, St Kilda

Category: Residential: Flats

Style: Victorian & Interwar:
Old English

Constructed: 1869-70, 1941

Designer: Frank Richardson (1941)

Amendment: TBA

Comment: Revised citation

Heritage Precinct: St Kilda
Botanical Gardens & Environs

Heritage Overlay: **HO7**

Graded as: Significant

Victorian Heritage Register: No

Significance

What is significant?

Keith Court at 27 Brighton Road, St Kilda is significant. The contributory features are the Victorian villa built in 1869-70, and the flats and garages built in 1940-41.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

How is it significant?

Keith Court at 27 Brighton Road, St Kilda is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Keith Court is historically significant as evidence of two distinct phases in the development of St Kilda. The Victorian villa is associated with the early development of St Kilda prior to the land boom of the 1880s and demonstrate how the area surrounding the Botanical Gardens became the location of substantial villas and mansion residences. The flats are associated the boom in flat building during the interwar period and demonstrate how their location was strongly influenced by the development of the public transport network, particularly tramways. (Criterion A)

The Victorian house is significant as a rare surviving example of an 1870s villa in St Kilda and is one of two known surviving examples in Brighton Road. (Criterion B)

Keith Court is of representative significance as an intact and legible example of a complex of flats that retains and incorporates the original Victorian villa, which is a distinctive St Kilda building type. The flats are significant as a design marking the last stages in the transition to Modernism in residential architecture, with the Old English style applied as a superficial dress to two essentially Modernist boxes. The transition to Modernism is also demonstrated by efficient internal planning of the flats with an absence of hallways, and the incorporation of flat roofs providing accessible outdoor space for the occupants. (Criterion D)

Keith Court is of aesthetic significance as a substantial block of flats in a garden setting with intricate Old English/Tudor detailing including divided-pane Tudor arched windows, separated by half-timbered panels with brick 'nogging' infill, octagonal leadlight windows bearing a Gothic interlocked 'K C' monogram, stucco medallions bearing heraldic symbols, and panels with half-round moulded balusters set in the parapets, which have dentilling. Of note are the expressed stairwells, which have elaborate brick and stucco parapeted Tudor archways surmounted by miniature Griffins above the entrances, balustrades projecting from the second level landings, and brick castellated turrets at the top. (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 (5.3.1 Mansions and grand villas, 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 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 and by 1947 St Kilda contained 5,500 purpose-built flats, a quarter of all flats in Melbourne (TEH).

Place history

The development of the St Kilda Botanical Gardens from c.1860 onwards encouraged the development of the surrounding streets into a desirable residential area. By the end of the nineteenth century Blessington, Tennyson, Dickens, and Herbert streets, and the west side of Brighton Road were lined with substantial villas and mansions set in large grounds.

In 1869-70 a villa was built on this property for Captain Robert Firth, a 'master mariner' as his own residence. The year before, he was recorded as the owner of 'land and foundations'. Comprised of eight rooms and situated on two acres of land, it was the first house built on the west side of Brighton Road between Carlisle Street and Dickens Street (Mozart Street was not created until c.1890) and had a substantial valuation of £129 pounds (RB).

Firth's villa is shown on the Vardy plan of 1873 when it was still the only house to the south of the Greyhound Hotel at the corner of Carlisle Street (see Figure 1).

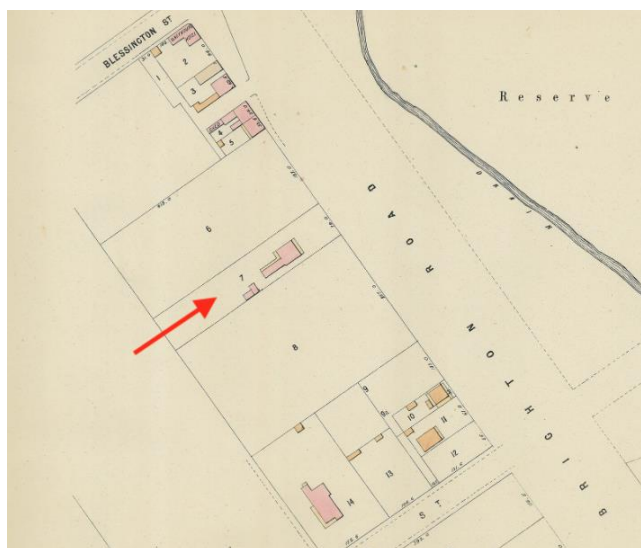


Figure 1: Extract of Vardy Plan No.6, South Ward. Firth's villa indicated by red arrow.

By the end of the nineteenth century a further four villas had been built on the vacant land to the north of Firth's residence, while the land to the south had been subdivided to create Mozart Street, where a pair of attached residences had been built, with a further pair of terrace houses at the south corner of Mozart Street and Brighton Road (MMBW).

The cable tram along Brighton Road, and the proximity to shopping, gardens and services encouraged the building of flats, which began to appear by the end of World War I. The electrification of the cable tram route and its extension, by 1926, from the terminus near Milton Street to Glen Huntly Road in Elsternwick coincided with the boom in flat development in St Kilda. 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 1940 then owner R.C. Richards obtained a building permit for nine one-bedroom flats contained in two, three storey blocks: a smaller block on the north side set back from the frontage containing three flats, and a larger block on the south side containing six. The 1870 villa was retained as a single residence, and three garages were built to the rear of it facing a side lane, with a laundry block behind it within the rear yard (BP).

Oddly, the original building plans, while having a similar layout show a completely different façade treatment, as well as a hipped tile roof. The main set of building plans is not signed, but Frank Richardson, architect, prepared two amended plans, which were submitted at the same time, so it is likely he is the designer. The amended plans showed the addition of a toilet and shower at the top of the stairs leading to the flat roof top, so it is evident this was intended to be accessed and used by the tenants of the flats (BP).

References

J.E.S. Vardy, 'Plan of the Borough of St Kilda. Surveyed and compiled under direction of the Borough Council', Hamel & Ferguson, Melbourne 1873 (Vardy plan)

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) 10676, 3 December 1940

St Kilda rate books (RB): January 1869 (no. in rate 1049); December 1870 (1059)

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1940, 1945, 1950

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

Keith Court is a complex of nine flats arranged in two three storey blocks in front of a Victorian Italianate villa, with a garage block at the rear. Despite the facade the one-bedroom flats are quite modern in plan, having had all internal hallway areas eliminated, and the incorporation of an accessible flat roof is another progressive feature for the period.

The blocks are rectilinear volumes, with the intricate Old English styling expressed almost entirely as surface treatment. Ranged over the plain clinker brick wall surfaces are Tudor features including divided-pane Tudor arched windows, separated by half-timbered panels with brick 'nogging' infill, octagonal leadlight windows bearing a Gothic interlocked 'K C' monogram, stucco medallions bearing heraldic symbols (one with the building's date, 2/2/41, on it), and panels with half-round moulded balusters set in the parapets, which have dentilling. Only at the stairwells does the modelling become at all three-dimensional, with elaborate brick and stucco parapeted Tudor archways surmounted by miniature Griffins above the entrances, balustrades projecting from the second level landings, and brick castellated turrets at the top.

At the rear, the Victorian house is largely intact. It is a typical symmetrical rendered Italianate villa with a slate hipped roof and rendered chimneys with cornices. The windows to the main elevation have a tripartite arrangement with narrow timber sashes on either side of a wider central sash. There are further timber sash windows in the side elevations. The verandah has been removed and an ornamental brick Old English style surround has been added to the front door (this was described in a previous heritage study as 'An inept attempt, more amusing than tragic, to integrate the Italianate villa with the Old English flats ...'). To the rear of the villa is the garage block. Constructed of brick this has a simple rectilinear form with rendered lintels and each garage is set in slightly creating three separate bays.

The buildings are in good condition and have a relatively high degree of external intactness. The key external change to the flats has been the extension of some of the ground floor windows to form doors leading to courtyard spaces. The brick front fence described in the 1992 heritage study has been significantly modified or replaced by the present front fence.

Comparative analysis

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.

Keith Court designed in 1940 and completed in 1941 is a design that marks the last stages in the transition to Modernism in residential architecture, with the Old English style applied as a superficial dress to two essentially Modernist boxes. The transition to Modernism is also demonstrated by efficient internal planning of the flats with an absence of hallways, and the incorporation of flat roofs providing accessible outdoor space for the occupants.

Keith Court compares with the two nearby flats, built a few years earlier: Zaneth Manor at 33 Brighton Road, designed in 1935 by James H. Wardrop, which is a blend of Old English/Tudor Revival and Moderne (Citation 432) and La Tourelle, 47A Brighton Road, designed in 1935 by W.H. Merritt, which blends influences of the English Vernacular Revival, Mediterranean and Moderne styles. All are representative of this trend and demonstrate how Moderne detailing was incorporated into residential building design by the mid to late 1930s.

Other examples include Moira, the house at 16 Glen Eira Road, Ripponlea designed by H.V. Gillespie in 1936 (Citation 1497) which blends the Mediterranean and Moderne styles and displays Gillespie's idiosyncratic design approach, as well as El Sonia (1938, designer unknown), 6 Fulton Street, St Kilda East, and Olgmend Court (1940, Leslie J.W. Reed), both of which blend Georgian Revival and Moderne (with Art Deco flourishes at El Sonia).

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

City of Port Phillip, *HO7 Elwood St Kilda Balaclava Ripponlea Precinct heritage review Stage 2: Review of existing heritage citations (Part 2)*, 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



At left: Main elevation of the south block showing panels with brick 'nogging' between the window bays, the Tudor arch to the top window and the inset balustrade panels to the parapet. Note octagonal window lower left (see 'Building details' below)

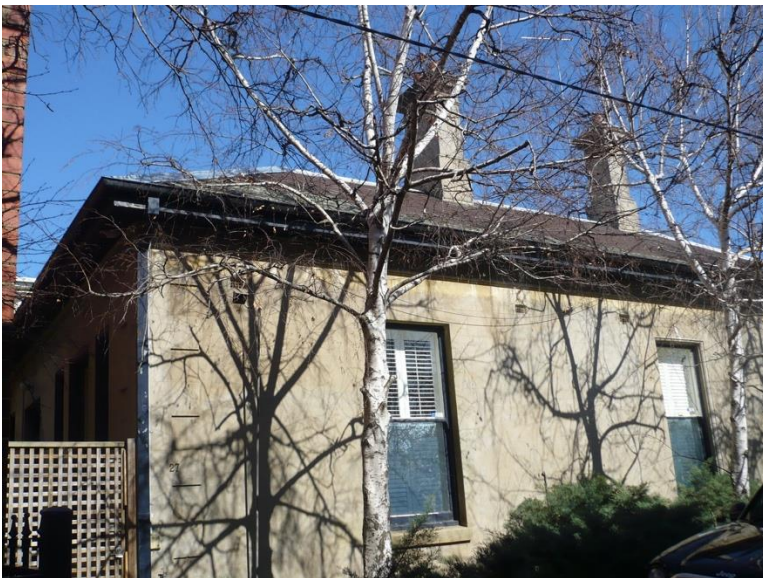
At right: View looking between the blocks to the Victorian villa



Main elevation of the north block



Building details from left: Medallions with heraldic symbols; octagonal leadlight glass window with pattern featuring an interlocked 'K' and 'C' in Gothic script; rendered balcony above entry to stairwell with Griffins in front of arched opening



Victorian villa at the rear, showing (at right) tripartite window forms



Rear view of Victorian villa



Garages at rear of property