

# City of Port Phillip Heritage Review

**Place name:** Yurnga  
**Other names:** Flats

**Citation No:**  
**302**



**Address:** 36 Brighton Road,  
Balaclava

**Category:** Residential: Flats

**Style:** Interwar: Arts & Crafts

**Constructed:** 1920

**Designer:** Harry R. Johnson

**Amendment:** TBA

**Comment:** Revised citation

**Heritage Precinct:** None

**Heritage Overlay:** **HO7**

**Graded as:** Significant

**Victorian Heritage Register:** No

## Significance

### *What is significant?*

Yurnga designed by Harry Johnson in 1920 for Gerald L. Wilson, at 36 Brighton Road, Balaclava is significant. The contributory features are the flats, the fence and entry gate along Brighton Road, and the garages facing Brunning Street.

Alterations and additions are not significant.

### *How is it significant?*

Yurnga at 36 Brighton Road, Balaclava is of local historic, representative, and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

### *Why is it significant?*

Yurnga is historically significant as an early block of flats and its location on Brighton Road, opposite the former cable tram offices and car shed, which served the cable (and later, electric) tram route along Brighton Road demonstrates how the location of flats was strongly influenced by the development of the public transport network, particularly tramways. It was designed by Harry R. Johnson, who was a prolific architect and designed several early blocks of flats. (Criterion A)

Yurnga is of representative significance as one of the most important examples of early flat design in St Kilda, particularly as a forerunner of the bachelor flat type and its experimental space saving design, which originally included wall beds fitted into the living rooms and balconies. The planning of the flats, which

includes three flat types - bed-sitters, one bedroom, and two bedroom – each accessed by their own stairwell is of note, as is the provision of garages and external balconies to all flats, which is unusual in early flats. (Criterion D)

Yurunga is of aesthetic significance as a substantial block of flats in the Arts & Crafts style on a prominent corner site. The highly articulated massing of the building is particularly distinctive, and the design cleverly adapts the roof forms and fenestration detail of the Federation Bungalow type, which are overlaid with Arts & Crafts features to create a highly picturesque and distinctive composition. Key elements include the shingled bays and multi-paned windows vertically stacked between three storey tall red brick piers or set one above the other in sheer wall planes, the terracotta tiled roof comprising a series of domestic scale, gabled and hipped sections, presenting a picturesque composition to both streets, and the massive concrete staircases and projecting upper floor semi-circular balconies with geometric render details. The aesthetic significance derives both from the finely detailed timber work of the bays, windows and eaves, and from the bold interplay of the shingle and render elements against the red of the plain brick walls and tiled roof. (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 (Praharn 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).

## Place history

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.

Yurnga, designed by local architect Harry R. Johnson, which was built in 1920 at the south corner of Brunning Street, Balaclava was one of the first blocks of flats in Brighton Road. It was located directly opposite the cable tram terminus, and on the opposite corner to the cable tram administrative offices and car shed on the north side Brunning Street.

As originally constructed Yurnga contained eighteen flats in three types over three levels: six bed-sitters, six one bedroom and six two-bedroom flats, each with a generous balcony. The flats were accessed by three sets of stairs, each serving one of the types of flats. As a concession to the small size of the flats wall beds were originally fitted in the living rooms and the balconies. There were three sets of stairs, each basically serving one of the types of flats. Despite their small size (and location opposite the tram terminus), the flats were evidently intended for relatively well-off owners or tenants, as eight brick lock-up garages were provided on site. The garages and a two-storey laundry block created enclosed service courtyards at the rear of the block.

## 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 permit (BP) 4275, 20 August 1920

Sands & McDougall Directories (SM) 1920-1940

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

Yurnga is substantial three storey block of flats on prominent site in Brighton Road at the corner of Brunning Street in Balaclava.

The block is sited on an irregularly shaped allotment, which possibly encouraged its very irregular plan form. In the original plans, each floor contains six separate units, three with entrances off Brighton Road and three off Brunning Street. The two southernmost flats (of each floor) are quite conventionally planned as relatively spacious, two-bedroom units, symmetrically planned to follow the already well established precedent of the duplex pair. The other flats, which step forward towards the corner, are squeezed and slotted together to form four tightly packed single apartments per floor. As noted in previous heritage studies, this tight planning resulted in some internal amenity and layout issues. For example, the middle flats

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have a living room and a separate bedroom, but their living rooms are virtually lightless, gaining daylight only through windows at the end recesses of the open stairwells. One of these flats is designed to a maximum width of only 12 ft (3.66m) and the two flats on Brunning Street each have only one primary living space (dimensions less than 5.5 x 3.9m) along with a tiny kitchen and bathroom and an auxiliary dressing room of about 5 square metres.

The external architecture of the building is made up almost entirely of elements taken from the domestic scale Federation Bungalow, and Arts & Crafts styles. Here the shingled bays and multi-paned windows are vertically stacked between three storey tall red brick piers or set one above the other in sheer wall planes. The terracotta tiled roof is made up of a series of domestic scale, gabled and hipped sections, presenting a picturesque composition to both streets. The only elements not derived directly from domestic precedents are the massive concrete staircases and projecting upper floor semi-circular balconies. Their dynamic forms and neat geometric render work combine well with the picturesque complexity of the whole.

Overall, the building has relatively good external integrity. The colour scheme of the flats is not original, and it is likely that the shingled sections would have been finished in a dark stain and the rough cast panels of the staircases and balconies left raw. The other key external change has been the glazing in of most of the balconies.

The flats are complemented by the original front fence and its distinctive gate, and the original garages to the rear. The fence comprises low rendered capped piers with protruding square details and angled sides, with a red brick balustrade between. The entry is defined by tall, angled brick piers with stepped rendered capitals that support a beam with 'Yurunga'. In the original design, ornamental iron chains were draped between the piers of the fence, but these now have either been engulfed by the hedge or removed, and an electric lantern that once hung from the metal bar above the entry piers has been removed. The iron gate is not original.

The garages at the rear are of brick with hipped tile roofs and have timber doors (the current doors are presumed to have replaced the original doors).

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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.

Yurunga is a fine example of a substantial Arts & Crafts apartment block on a prominent corner site. The aesthetic significance derives both from the finely detailed timber work of the bays, windows and eaves, and from the bold interplay of the shingle and render elements against the red of the plain brick walls and tiled roof.

Yurunga is also significant as an early apartment block built toward end of the first wave of flat development in St Kilda that began with The Canterbury and which heralded the boom in flat building that would follow in the 1920s and 1930s. It is one of several important examples. New forms of living arrangements were experimented with and new approaches to articulating the larger scale of residential architecture were explored, and is one of several important examples that further developed or established precedents for the then new type of residential building. For example the concept of the space saving bachelor flat, which was to be later explored by another generation of architects in the mid to late 1930s is already in evidence

here. Though in Yurnga Johnson's solutions to these issues cannot claim unqualified success, his design is best appreciated in the context of this period of exploration and experimentation. Similar issues are also evident in the layout of Bellaire, the bachelor flats designed by Mewton & Grounds more than a decade later at 3 Cowderoy Street, St Kilda West (see Citation 877).

Despite this, all the flats at Yurnga were provided with large open verandahs, which, in accordance with the virtual obsession with fresh air at the time, were no doubt intended to provide further year-round living and sleeping accommodation. As confirmation of this, and as an indication of Johnson's experimentation with space saving, the plans show fold-down wall beds installed in each verandah. More curiously, the flats with separate bedrooms also have wall beds installed in their living rooms.

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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 as an individual place with external paint controls. The existing colour scheme is not original, and a more authentic colour scheme would enhance the appearance of the building.

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## Primary source

City of Port Phillip, *H07 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 20<sup>th</sup> century architectural study*, Volume 3, 1992

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## Other images





