

Heritage Citation – Individual Place

Heritage Place: Moonbria Flats
Address: 68 Mathoura Road, Toorak

HO Reference: HO81
Citation status: Final
Date Updated: 8 March 2022
Year of Construction: 1942

Designer: Roy Grounds
Builder: Unknown



Photograph of Moonbria Flats (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Location map and extent of HO81.

Heritage Group: Residential Buildings (private)
Heritage Type: Flats

Key Theme: Building suburbs
Key Sub-theme: Developing higher density living – architect designed apartments

Significance Level: State

Recommendation: Retain as an individually significant place on the HO; nominate property for the Victorian Heritage Register, specifically in relation to the building design by, and association with, Roy Grounds.

Controls:	<input type="checkbox"/> External paint colours	<input type="checkbox"/> Internal alterations	<input type="checkbox"/> Tree controls
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Victorian Heritage Register	<input type="checkbox"/> Incorporated Plans	<input type="checkbox"/> Outbuildings and fences exemptions
	<input type="checkbox"/> Prohibited uses may be permitted	<input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal Heritage Place	

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The property at 68 Mathoura Road, Toorak (otherwise known as Moonbria Flats), is significant. Specifically, the scale, form and detailing of the modernist apartment block is of State significance. The garden edging, wall and plantings are not significant.

How is it significant?

Moonbria Flats are of local historical, aesthetic and associative significance to the City of Stonnington. As an intact structure designed by the pre-eminent modernist architect Roy Grounds, it also has for associative significance at the state level.

Why is it significant?

Moonbria Flats are of historical importance in demonstrating the development of early 20th century high rise apartment buildings within the suburb of Toorak, during a time when some existing residents protested against the erection of flats within a suburb that was previously known for its affluent freestanding homes. Moonbria Flats also have historical significance as a block of flats that was completed in the World War II period and subsequently occupied by servicemen and women. (Criterion A)

Moonbria Flats are aesthetically significant as an intact and visually distinct example of an early 20th century modernist apartment block. Key characteristics contributing towards its aesthetic value include the scale and form, glazing, cupola, rear courtyard, entrance treatment, and concrete balconies. (Criterion E)

Moonbria Flats have associative significance as a unique and visually distinct apartment block designed by the well-reputed Australian architect, Roy Grounds. (Criterion H)

HERCON Criteria Assessment

A	<i>Importance to the course, or pattern of our cultural or natural history</i>	Moonbria Flats are of historical importance in demonstrating the development of early 20th century high rise apartment buildings within the suburb of Toorak, during a time when some existing residents protested against the erection of flats within a suburb that was previously known for its affluent freestanding homes. Moonbria Flats also have historical significance as a block of flats that was completed in the World War II period and subsequently occupied by servicemen and women.
B	<i>Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of our cultural or natural history</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.

<i>C</i>	<i>Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural or natural history</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>D</i>	<i>Important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>E</i>	<i>Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics</i>	Moonbria Flats is aesthetically significant as an intact and visually distinct example of an early 20th century modernist apartment block. Key characteristics contributing towards its aesthetic value include the scale and form, glazing, cupola, rear courtyard, entrance treatment, and concrete balconies.
<i>F</i>	<i>Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>G</i>	<i>Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of the continuing and developing cultural traditions</i>	This place does not meet this criterion.
<i>H</i>	<i>Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in our history.</i>	Moonbria Flats have associative significance as a unique and visually distinct apartment block designed by the well-reputed Australian architect, Roy Grounds.

Description

• Physical Analysis

Moonbria Flats is a four-storey modernist apartment block. The masonry structure consists of open face yellow bricks laid in a stretcher bond. The single structure consists of a main block is parallel to the back lane in an east west axis with two flanking wings projecting north creating a 'U shaped form' around an open internal courtyard. The structure mainly addresses Mathoura Road on its west elevation.

The façade presents an asymmetrical form with a stepped back fourth floor. The flat façade is defined at each level by a long shared cantilevered balcony. The balcony is finished in a smooth white render that stands out in front of the yellow brick façade. The balcony has a simple but strong horizontal form on the façade. The external and internal balconies lack a balustrade. Behind the shared balconies are the equally spaced full height French doors with fanlight. The doors and window joinery are painted white. The fenestration on each level except the top floor is laid out in a group of three doors to the left and two doors to the right. The centre of the façade where the main ground entrance is located consists of a

full height glazed wall section. This glazing is a later addition (refer to Further Images). Whilst the glazing is not original, it does not appear to negatively impact the design of the structure as the material is sympathetic and the original glazed tower is still visible through the glass. The top floor fenestration lacks the group of three doors to the left as the floor is stepped back. The top level terminates at the wide projecting eaves of the flat roof. The roof is sheet cladded with a trimdeck profile in a (likely) asbestos cement sheeting and corrugated galvanised iron. A defining feature of the façade is the projecting circular lift tower forming projecting from the roof level. The circular form is entirely clad in glazing with white aluminium frame.

The southern elevation consists of a row of eight internal single garage spaces with a steel or timber counterweight doors painted blue. The rest of the façade includes equally spaced small casement ventilation windows in pairs forming groupings of six windows on the three upper floors above the garage doors. The east elevation includes groupings of main windows and service ventilation windows. Opposite to the west elevation, the centre section of the east elevation is occupied by a shorter row of shared balconies on the upper three floors.

The north elevation wraps around the internal open courtyard. The courtyard is accessible from the west side of the property from Mathoura Road and leads to internal access points to the main building. The centre of the courtyard is raised and includes garden beds and a paved walkway laid in a pebblecrete. The raised section is demarcated by retaining walls consisting of yellow brick and is accessible via steps laid in red brick. The lower section of the courtyard is also laid in red bricks which leads to the secondary entrances to the building. The main feature of the north elevation is the wide shared balconies on the upper levels. The first level balcony is supported by round concrete columns finished with a decorative square bright blue tile. The secondary courtyard building entrances are also characterised by half the columns with the same form and finish.

The upper-level balcony flat parapets are clad in a larger square blue tile with the round columns continuing upwards forming a distinct vertical façade element. Additional white steel pilotis support the balconies further adding to the vertical element forms of the façade. The shared balcony floors are finished in a smooth screed painted orange which is also found on the internal stairs. The external walls facing the balconies consist of white bagged bricks with wide paired timber casement windows painted white with louvred shutters. The balcony ceilings are plank clad possibly in timber painted white.

Two main circulation areas are located on the east and west sides of the structure. The west circulation zone includes a rounded core and spiral steps wrapping around the lift core. The east circulation zone consists of a spiral stair with a blue steel balustrade.

Moonbria Flats is bounded to the west by Mathoura Road, a bluestone laid laneway to the south and residential properties to the east and north. The structure is set back from Mathoura Road and the boundary is demarcated a tall white bagged brick wall. There is an arched steel entrance gate with the word 'MOONBRIA 68' featured in the steelwork. Moonbria Flats is landscaped but does not form an integral part of the overall design. The landscape includes several mature trees including a lilly pilli (*syzygium smithii*) tree by the main west entrance and a mature tree in the internal courtyard. Moonbria Flats is considered in good condition. It appears that the structure has remained highly intact. All the fenestration joinery remains consistent. Alterations may have occurred in individual units. Overall, Moonbria Flats is considered to be of high integrity.

- ## Alterations and Additions

- Arched steel gate entrance added (post-2009).
- Glazing installed on the façade, enclosing the circular stairwell.
- Several garage doors replaced.
- Several air conditioning units added to the south, east and internal courtyard façades.
- Sections of the roof re clad in corrugated galvanised iron.
- Services added to the roof.
- Antenna added to the roof.
- Downpipes, gutters, and rainwater heads replaced.

History

- ### Historical Context

For thousands of years preceding European colonialism, the area now known as Stonnington was the traditional home of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung people of the Eastern Kulin Nation. This environment would have provided Traditional Owners with access to pre-contact plains, grassy woodland, and floodplains on the banks of the Yarra River (Birrarung), Gardiners Creek (Kooyong Koot), and Hawksburn Creek (now channelised), in a rolling landscape on the northern shore of Port Phillip Bay. It is important to note that the rich cultural heritage of Traditional Owners in Stonnington did not end with colonialism—it has a rich presence to this day.

Following the establishment of Melbourne in 1835, squatter John Gardiner and many others like him sought out land in what would become present day Toorak and surrounds on account of its densely timbered landscape, undulating terrain and proximity to water. By 1840, crown land sales marked the area's transition to pastoral settlement, and later in 1851, with the purchase of land in Hawthorn by Thomas Herbert Power, the surrounding environments gradually became a place where the early merchant and squatter elite of Melbourne built their homesteads. In Toorak, this is best represented by the purchase of lot 26 by James Jackson, associate in Jackson, Rae & Co. soap and candle merchants. Jackson was described by politician William Westgarth as 'Melbourne's greatest merchant of this early time' (Forster 1999, 10). It is only fitting that his house, called Toorak House, would be the namesake of what would become arguably the most affluent suburb in Melbourne. Following the discovery of gold in the 1850s and the wealth this produced for ancillary trades, the Toorak area drew in Melbourne's newly wealthy. Today, over a century later, Toorak still has connotations of wealth and prestige as best represented in its history and built environment (Forster 1999, 5–26).

- ### Place History

Moonbria Flats was erected in 1942 during World War II to designs prepared by the renowned architect Roy Grounds. A leading figure in the modern movement, Grounds formed partnerships with noted architects Geoffrey Mewton, Robyn Boyd and Frederick Romberg over his career. He experimented with house plans that fused living, dining and minimised passageways early on in his career, and became particularly recognised for his radical use of geometric forms in domestic architecture (Hamann 2007). This is readily apparent across designs such as the triangular Leyser House at Kew (1950-51), the circular Henty House at Frankston (1951-52), and the circular courtyard set within a square perimeter in his own Grounds House at Hill Street, Toorak (1954) (Hamman 2007). Other key designs also include the National Gallery of Victoria (1959-68) and Arts Centre Melbourne (1969-84).

Moonbria Flats was designed during a period of major flat development in Toorak. Other works completed by Grounds during this period thus also included Quamby Flats at Glover Court, Toorak (1941) and Clendon Flats, Armadale (1940). At the time of its completion, Moonbria Flats comprised a twenty-two room brick flat block. Like many of Grounds' other apartment designs, it also featured a large access gallery that acted as an outdoor deck (Sawyer 1982, 58). The radical and complex nature of these decks is readily illustrated in the fact that they have been variously referred to as balconies, verandahs and an internal street (Sawyer 1982, 58).

Erected in the middle of World War II, its initial occupants were predominantly individuals serving in the armed forces. Known tenants included USA Red Cross official Wayne Gerard Clarke, air force officer Andreas Phillips, naval officer Clifford Clark, Women's Auxiliary Air Force officer Mabel Miller, and members of the Australian Women's Army Service Nancy Swanson and Peg Forbes (Context Pty Ltd 1993).

Its revolutionary design did not necessarily resonate with conservative, affluent Toorak residents at the time of its erection, who had long viewed flat developments as a threat to the exclusivity of the neighborhood (The Australian Home Builder 1924, 55; The Argus 1934, 3). While the lack of archival material has made it difficult to ascertain the residents of Mathoura during the post-war period, its demographic likely comprised of single people, a direct contrast to the traditional nuclear families that occupied the larger freestanding homes that had long dominated the suburb.

At an unknown point in time, the building underwent a major change through the introduction of additional glazing to the façade. The original building design consisted of an exposed glazed tower, as is demonstrated in the historical image provided in this citation (see Further Images).

Comparative Analysis

Roy Grounds is widely considered as one of the most significant modernist architects of the 20th century. Within Stonnington, there are comparable examples of his works, and these can be used to underscore the significance of the Moonbria Flats.

These comparable examples include:

- **Clendon Flats (13 Clendon Road, Armadale) (HO130, individually significant in precinct).** Clendon Flats were constructed in 1940 to the designs of Roy Grounds. The flats observe rectilinear form with strong party walls and recessed balconies. Two distinct bays can be observed with a central walkway. The Clendon Flats are comparable to Moonbria Flats as two examples of high-density apartment design attributed to Roy Grounds. Though both designs are attributed to Grounds, they have a number of differences. While Clendon Flats are relatively plain in form, Moonbria Flats are unorthodox and use a series of features that are not present at Clendon Flats. These include the unorthodox window design and cupola. With this, Moonbria Flats can be considered a more progressive and notable representation of Grounds' work.
- **Grounds House (24 Hill Street, Toorak) (HO60 and VHR No. H1963).** Grounds House, designed by Roy Grounds, was constructed in 1953-54 and is included on both the City of Stonnington Heritage Overlay as well as the Victorian Heritage Register. Though smaller in scale to Moonbria Flats, Grounds House is still a comparable example as an example of Grounds' modernist design. What is more, behind the main residence on Hill Street are four flats, emphasising Grounds'

work with high-density design. Another key feature, and one most often associated with Grounds' work, is that of the centralized courtyard, which is represented best at the Grounds House, but is also present at Moonbria Flats.

- **Quamby (3 Glover Court, Toorak) (HO44 and VHR No. H0603).** Quamby, at 3 Glover Court Toorak, was constructed in 1941 to the designs of Roy Grounds. Completed just the year before the Moonbria Flats, Quamby is a strong comparative example for Moonbria Flats as it illustrates Grounds' ability to construct a singular structure housing multiple flats – in this case six flats – without compromising on form. The building has many shared features, including an emphasis on windows, rectilinear form, and a stepped roofline.

Grounds' work covers multiple places of state heritage significance, and this comparative assessment illustrates the various design similarities that Moonbria Flats shares with them. The emphasis on rectilinear form, the use of both concrete, glazing, and brick masonry, the stepped roof form and rear courtyard – and most interestingly, the glazed cupola. These features are all represented across Grounds' most significant works, save the cupola, and work to inform the significance of Moonbria Flats.

References

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Limitations

1. Access to all heritage places was limited to a visual inspection from the public domain. The interiors of buildings and inaccessible areas such as rear gardens were not accessed as part of this heritage study.
2. Condition and site modification assessment was limited to a visual inspection undertaken from the public domain.
3. The historical notes provided for this citation are not considered to be an exhaustive history of the site.

Further Images



Moonbria Flats façade, from Mathoura Road (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Window and balcony details on façade (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Moonbria Flats cupola (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Moonbria Flats entrance, and alterations to front wall (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Oblique view of Moonbria Flats, looking south east (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Oblique detail view of cupola and façade (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Southern elevation of Moonbria Flats (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Garages on southern elevation (source: Extent Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021).



Moonbria Flats prior to glazing installation on façade (source: Wille, P., & Grounds, R. (1941), SLV).



Original advertisement for the Moonbria flats (source: Advertising (1941, November 22). *The Argus* (Melbourne, Vic. : 1848 - 1957), p. 3).

Authors

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