

Name	Former R Haughton James House	Reference No	
Address	82 Molesworth Street, Kew	Survey Date	12 September 2005; access: 31 January 2006
Building Type	Residence	Grading	A
Date	1957	Previous Grading	B



Extent of Overlay

To title boundaries.

Intactness ☒ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

Heritage Status ☐ HV ☐ AHC ☒ NT ☐ Rec. BPS Heritage Overlay

History

The house at 82 Molesworth Street, Kew, was designed in 1956 by the noted architect and author, Robin Boyd, partner in the firm of architects, Grounds, Romberg and Boyd (GR&B). Boyd travelled overseas as a visiting Professor at MIT in 1957, with the construction of 82 Molesworth Street supervised by Roy Grounds and Paul Wallace. Permits for the construction of the house were lodged in late 1956, the builders being Clissolds P/L.¹ Boyd's client was the well known Melbourne industrial designer, painter and advertising executive, Jimmy (Richard Haughton) James. James occupied the house until the middle of the 1960s, before he retired and reputedly moved to Positano, Italy in 1966 to concentrate on his art practice.² An extension and some alterations were made to the house, it is thought, soon after its acquisition by K Keown, a new owner, in 1967.³ Keown subsequently occupied the premises until at least 1974.⁴ Later owners Gabrielle and Hans Eisen applied to make further alterations to the property in 1989, refurbishing the kitchen, and again in 1999. The 1999 drawings were prepared by a member of the Eisen family and included a new carport,⁵ however it is not clear that this project proceeded. In 2001 the property was subdivided and the portion abutting the Yarra River was acquired by Melbourne Parks and Waterways. The house was sold in 2003, and the new owners refurbished the laundry to a design by Edgard Pirotta in 2004.

The house has been classified by the National Trust of Australia (Vic) as being of regional significance.

(G Butler & Associates, Kew B-graded buildings study (draft), 2001, additional research by Lovell Chen, 2005)

Description & Integrity

The former *R Haughton James House* at 82 Molesworth Street, Kew, is a distinctive architect-designed house in the postwar Melbourne Regional style sited on a steeply sloping river bank bushland site. Constructed over two levels, the ground floor living areas are arranged within an eye-shaped plan which is surmounted by a rectilinear entrance and bedroom wing. The flat roof, originally membrane, is now clad with ribbed galvanised steel decking which extends to form a wide eaves overhang on three side and a carport to the east which is supported by a trussed beam and hardwood posts. The great majority of malthoid-roofed houses have had their roofs replaced in this way in the Melbourne area.

The curved eastern wall of the lower level is built into the hillside with visible sections of overpainted brickwork and brick retaining wall elsewhere, while the western elevation comprises a curved timber-framed window wall. The south and east elevations of the first floor level are clad with overpainted precast foam concrete panels, while the north and west elevations repeat the timber-framed window walls of the ground floor.

Alterations, possibly carried out around 1967, involved the extension of the first floor wing in an easterly direction into the former 'verandah' or carport area.⁶ At this time, or later, an original row of timber-framed highlight awning windows in the south elevation appears to have been altered at both ends with the sills of the eastern three bays lowered and replaced with two larger windows and the three western-most bays removed completely. Other minor external alterations appear to have occurred, including minor changes to door and window openings in the ground floor west elevation, the installation of a gas heater at the junction of the east and west curved ground floor elevations and the extension and construction of a new balustrade around the first floor terrace; all these are obscured from the street.

Historical Context

Residential development of land adjoining the Yarra river bank was spurred by the construction of the Yarra Boulevard during the 1930s. In the post World War II period, modern architect-designed homes began to be constructed on previously inaccessible or steeply sloping blocks above the Boulevard, or, as in the case of this property, along the river bank itself. Some of these houses are noted in the comparative analysis, below.

Comparative Analysis

The *R Haughton James House* is one of the most memorable of Robin Boyd designs, overshadowing the *Wilson House* at 8 Yarra Street and his *Date*, *Uglow* and *Zelman Cowan* houses in the area, largely through the force of its ideas. It immediately predates two of Boyd's most notable houses, the *Clemson House* at 24 Milfay Avenue, Studley Park (A-graded),⁷ and Boyd's own house at 240 Walsh Street, South Yarra. The design reflects Boyd's growing interest in a 'significant' and monumentalised form, driven by a central idea often linking to function with a broad geometric idea or emblem. The semi-elliptical plan has no Melbourne parallel - indeed, it would seem to have no direct parallel in Australia. Functionally, it is related to the hemicyclic experience of houses as developed by Frank Lloyd Wright in his *Jacobs* and other houses. In those, Wright organised curving plans to be occupied at a sequence of points when the sun reached its strongest on those points - in other words, the plan and the pattern of house usage followed the movement of the sun. Boyd had designed a directly hemicyclic house in Brighton - the *Lloyd House*, now demolished - a year previously.⁸ The semi-elliptical *R Haughton James House* plan works a similar way, with the breakfast and kitchen area exposed to morning sun, and the meals areas, then the lounge, then the immediate hearth area coming under more sun at midday, the afternoon and then at the sunset in sequence, the space 'opening' and 'closing' in width in accord with the light of the day.

The *R Haughton James House*'s geometricizing also parallels, conceptually, Roy Grounds' development of circular and polygonal gazebo-shaped buildings, and precedes Grounds and Romberg's foray into Victorian summer-house, rustication and canted bay imageries with their gazebo additions to *Ormond College* at the University of Melbourne (1958-65). It also parallels GR&B's foray into striking geometricized and boldly structural expression, as with their unrealised Myer Music Bowl fan design of 1956 and, more influentially, the inverted shell concrete bowl for the *Canberra Academy of Science* (1956-9). Boyd was intensely interested in Frank Lloyd Wright's curvilinear and polygonal designs of the 1940s and 1950s,⁹ and the *R Haughton James House*, seen from below, resembles Wright's *Boomer House* in California, of c. 1949. Formally, the *R Haughton James House* is also closely related

to Philip Johnson's controversial house designs in the United States, in particular the *Wiley* and *Boissonnas* houses of 1952-4.¹⁰

Within contemporary Australian architecture the house is just as transgressive as anything being produced by the Americans; in boldness of form and construction, it was really only rivalled in Boyd's work by his own house, a cable suspension structure at 240 Walsh Street, South Yarra, completed a year later, and the Featherston-Currey house at Ivanhoe, of 1965-7. This enclosed an open hillside with existing foliage inside its walls and replaced most 'room' spaces with open platforms.

The *R Haughton James House* also compares with a series of other notable houses in the Kew region, north of Studley Park Road in particular, and is more intact than many of these. They include Boyd's Pettigrew house at 21 Redmond Street, of 1945 and later, now heavily altered (q.v., B-graded), Roy Grounds' Leyser house of 1951-2 at 11 Hume Street (ungraded), with a famous triangular plan buried under later alterations, 9 Hume Street, by John and Phyllis Murphy, 1955-6 (demolished), 7 Hume Street, by Douglas Alexandra, 1957 (q.v., B-graded but recommended to be downgraded to ungraded in this study following extensive alterations), the Biancardi House 20 Yarra Street, by Gerd and Renate Block (q.v., recommended for A-grading in this review), the Krongold house at 25 Studley Park Road, by Theodore Berman (q.v., B-graded), and two by Chancellor and Patrick: the Freiberg house at Yarravale Road, and a later house near the Holroyd Street corner, of 1958 and 1963-5 respectively. Of all these only the Biancardi and Krongold houses and the two (ungraded) Chancellor and Patrick designs are thought to be generally intact.

Assessment Against Criteria

Amended Heritage Victoria Criteria

CRITERION B: The importance of a place or object in demonstrating rarity or uniqueness.

The eye-shaped plan is the only known example of such a form used in Melbourne, and may be unique in Australia.

CRITERION E: The importance of the place or object in exhibiting good design or aesthetic characteristics and/or in exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features.

The *R Haughton James House* is a fine example of 1950s postwar residential design in the Melbourne Regional style, by noted architect Robin Boyd. The house is a rigorous contrast of rational and organic design which employs an unusual combination of elliptical and box forms. Its configuration in striking geometric shapes, and its bold use of structure, epitomise the Melbourne Regional style, other key examples of which have generally been demolished or altered. The house is a rare surviving example of Wrightian curvilinear hemicyclic planning.

Statement of Significance

The *R Haughton James House* is of local historical and state architectural significance as a fine example of 1950s postwar residential design in the Melbourne regional style, by noted architect Robin Boyd. The house is a rigorous contrast of rational and organic design which employs an unusual combination of elliptical and box forms. Its configuration in striking geometric shapes, and its bold use of structure, epitomise the Melbourne Regional style, other key examples of which have generally been demolished or altered. The house is a rare surviving example of Wrightian curvilinear hemicyclic planning. The house is broadly intact externally, though there have been a series of relatively minor alterations.

Grading Review

Upgrade from B to A.

Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Boroondara Planning Scheme.

Identified By

Pru Sanderson Design Pty Ltd, Kew Urban Conservation Study, 1988

References

General: Pru Sanderson Design Pty Ltd, Kew Urban Conservation Study, 1988, G Butler & Associates, Kew B-graded places study (draft), 2001.

Specific:

¹ Details sourced from the City of Kew Building index, #598, dated 26 October 1956.

² Details provided in draft citation by G Butler & Associates, *Kew B-graded places study* (draft), 2001.

³ Details sourced from the City of Kew Building Index, #1075, dated 11 January 1967.

⁴ *Sands & McDougall Directory of Victoria*, 1974.

⁵ Details and drawings sourced from the City of Kew Building Index, #4909, dated 8 March 1990, and from the City of Boroondara Planning File 40/409/01887 Part 1, drawings dated December 1999.

⁶ Comparing the approved drawings sourced from the City of Kew Building Index, #598, Grounds, Romberg and Boyd, dated 26 October 1956 with #4909, Allan Powell Pty Ltd Architects, dated 24 November, 1989, indicate that this non-original bay was 'existing' at the time the 1989 proposal was lodged. The drawings for brick veneer additions, City of Kew Building Index, #1075, dated 11 January 1967, however, are not held in the council files. The index suggests that other proposals may have been prepared around the late 1980s.

⁷ Pru Sanderson, City of Kew Urban Conservation Study, 1988, Citation 61.

⁸ The Lloyd and other Boyd plans, apart from his own South Yarra house, are all stored in the Romberg and Boyd archive, State Library of Victoria. This was assembled by James McCormack and extended and re-ordered chronologically by Conrad Hamann in 1977.

¹⁰ Johnson became a personal friend of Romberg and of Boyd in this period. In the Wiley house, Johnson perched a living room and kitchen mass precariously on top of a massive stone plinth housing the bedroom and bathrooms areas. Boyd, almost in reply, directly inverted the whole form, placing the sleeping area above and the living and kitchen areas below, and similarly dug his semi-elliptical lower floor into the hillside, as Johnson had dug the plinth of his Wiley house. Upstairs, the original small area of the sleeping rooms marked them out as an elegant and lightly constructed garden folly, rather like Johnson's own house at New Canaan, Connecticut, of 1949. Against architectural modernism's general paradigm of industrialised spatial and programmatic consistency, Johnson's overheated dramatizing of function and spatial differences was thought alarmingly transgressive in American architectural circles. Johnson was linked in this perceived waywardness to Eero Saarinen, to whom Boyd and Grounds were also gravitating, and Saarinen was linked overwhelmingly with spectacularly sculptural and varied forms, often generated from seemingly marginal differences in function.