THE ALEXANDRA AVENUE PRECINCT

HERITAGE PLACE CITATION

HO 122

NAME OF PLACE: The Alexandra Avenue Precinct.

OTHER NAMES OF PLACE: Part Alexandra Avenue Area, South Yarra Hill.

ADDRESS / LOCATION: 49-81 Alexandra Avenue, 122-4 Caroline Street, 49-69 Darling Street

(west side), 56 Darling Street (east side), 2-4 Dobson Street, 280-286

Domain Road, 1-3 Lawson Grove; 522-6 Punt Road.

PROPERTY INFORMATION: Not available.

EXISTING LISTINGS: This report reviews part of the existing HO122.

LEVEL OF SIGNFICANCE: Local.

ASSESSED BY: John Statham, Heritage Advisor, City of Stonnington.

ASSESSMENT DATE: May 2011

Updated June 2013 to include minor corrections to the attached

Schedule of Buildings.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

What is significant?

The Alexandra Avenue precinct is a residential area constructed on escarpments and swampy terrain made available through the reclamation of land along the Yarra bank and the subdivision of the Avoca Estate. The greater part of the graded buildings in the precinct are constructed to exotic designs by architect and developer Howard R Lawson although a number of buildings by others, such as flats at 56 Darling Street and at 53 and 55 Alexandra Avenue and a small group of earlier dwellings in Domain Road also contribute to the character and significance of the area. The setting, arising from the land form and from plantings within the individual developments and along the Yarra Bank and Darling Gardens provides a dramatic context for the precinct. The whole development is without equal for the period in Melbourne.

Elements which contribute to the significance of the precinct include:

- The high degree of intactness of the early buildings to their c.1940 state. Building stock survives largely intact and the area is notable for the general absence of prominent additions and alterations. Original detailing typically survives throughout the area;
- The general uniformity of character achieved through consistent use of materials such as face brick or rendered wall surfaces with Marseilles or other tiled, pitched roofs;
- The range and quality of interwar buildings including blocks of flats. duplexes and interwar maisonettes coexisting with a smaller number of slightly earlier detached villas;

- The predominantly two and three-storey scale of built form within the precinct which allows the landmark Lawson buildings such as Beverley Hills and Stratton Heights to remain the preeminent developments in this locale;
- The landscaped settings derived from the Darling Gardens, the Yarra River bank environs and the undeveloped front and side setbacks to individual properties;
- The absence of prominent, modern car parking facilities in most sections of the precinct;
- The low numbers of prominent modern infill buildings.

How is it significant?

The Alexandra Avenue precinct is of local social, historical and aesthetic significance.

Why is it significant?

The Alexandra Avenue precinct is of local historical significance. Developed on difficult terrain above reclaimed sections of the Yarra bank (2.1.3 Making Roads and Railways) the area illustrates the earliest phases of the surge of apartment development which took place in Toorak and South Yarra following the subdivision of large Victorian-era properties in the early twentieth century. (8.1.3 The end of an era - mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century). This pattern of settlement transformed the built environment and social character of the area by replacing the spacious mansions of the wealthy with modest suburban villas and higher density, lower income housing (Historic Theme: 8.6.2 Developing apartment living). The significance of the area is enhanced by its association with notable architect, Howard Lawson.

The Alexandra Avenue precinct is of aesthetic significance as a particularly intact and cohesive grouping of flats, many of which adopt a unique and exotic architectural character. Predominantly designed by Howard Lawson (Historic Theme: 8.6.3 Architect designed apartments), the individual blocks of apartments vary in detailing and display divergent architectural influences including Bungalow, Spanish Mission and Moderne styles. Nonetheless, they exhibit a high degree of consistency in terms of their overall form, materiality and character. Other buildings in the area such as the flats at 56 Darling Street and others at 53 and 55 Alexandra Avenue were not part of Lawson's oeuvre but, nonetheless, contribute to character and significance of the area. The theatrical setting arising from the topography and landscaped areas along the river and across the escarpment more generally contribute to the character and the aesthetic significance of the precinct.

The Alexandra Avenue precinct is of social significance for the extent to which it illustrates the introduction of new architectural typologies which changed the social mix of the area. The introduction of flats and apartments provided new forms of accommodation and additional freedom for families but particularly for single men and women (Historic Theme: 8.6.2 Developing apartment living).

PHOTOS





Figure 1 'Maritama' at the intersection of Darling Street and Alexandra Avenue. 'Beverly Hills' at left and rear.

Figure 2 'Kildare', 'York House' and 'Dorrington House' in Alexandra Avenue.

PLAN

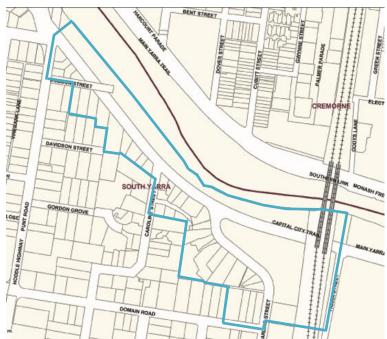


Figure 31 Extent of proposed boundary to HO122.

DESCRIPTION

The Alexandra Avenue Precinct comprises a section of South Yarra Hill occupying the entire escarpment to the River Yarra between Punt Road and the Yarra River Railway Bridge.

The Darling Gardens and flats at 56 Darling Road form the easternmost elements within the precinct. To their west, a small group of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century dwellings in

Domain Road are among the earliest developments to the north of Domain Road. The substantial Italianate dwelling at 280 Domain Road is of some individual significance. To their north, the early group of bungalow flats at 49-53 Darling Street comprises some the earliest work in the precinct by architect and developer Howards Lawson. Two blocks of flats on the adjacent sites date from c.1970s and contribute to the area through their scale and typology. 59 Darling Street, constructed for Lawson's son. Ernest was demolished in 2010 and replaced by a multistorey development. At 61-63 Darling Street is Beverly Hills, the most prominent of Lawson's flats. The development comprises two tall blocks around a swimming pool surrounded by established palms and a massive Morton Bay Fig Tree. The development draws its inspiration from images of Hollywood popularised by contemporary magazines. Its importance is recognised by its A1 grading. More modest Lawson developments survive in the lower sections of Darling Street. Santoy, at No 65 is realised in bungalow style. No 67 Darling Street is a simple block of three flats dating from c.1922. No 69 Darling Street is another block of flats constructed c.1932. 'Maritama', constructed c.1940 at the corner of Darling Street and Alexander Avenue is a landmark development in a Moderne mode. It forms the easternmost element in a succession of highly graded flats along Alexandra Avenue, many of which can be attributed to Lawson. These typically occupy elevated sites and adopt simple block-like forms enlivened by rendered detail recalling Spanish Baroque sources. They include: 'Narooma' at No79 (c.1934); 'Kildare 'at No77 (c.1935); 'York House' at No75 (c.1934); and 'Dorrington House' (c.1933) at the intersection with Caroline Street. In adjacent sections of Caroline Street and Lawson Grove, a number of individually significant flats by Lawson survive. These include: 'Devonshire House' at No122 Caroline Street, 'Durham Hall' at No124 Caroline Street, 'Warwick Lodge', at 1 Lawson Grove (c.1935); 'The Manor', at 2 Lawson Grove (c.1935); and 'Berkley House' at 3 Lawson Grove (c.1935). To the west of Caroline Street, Alexandra Avenue is dominated by Lawson's 'Stratton Heights' at 63 Alexandra Avenue. It adopts a sprawling Moderne design, occupying a commanding site, high above the street. More modest flats by Lawson and others survive in this section of the precinct. Some, such as those at Nos 53 and 55 can not be attributed to Lawson. However, their scale, architectural expression and period of construction provide a useful contribution to the character and significance of the precinct. Further to the west, a cluster of five California bungalow-inspired designs by Lawson occupy an island site bounded by Punt Road, Alexandra Avenue and Dobson Street. They are all highlyvalued buildings.

As noted in the citation for this area prepared as part of Prahran Conservation Study, 1983, 'The whole development is without equal for the period in Melbourne'.

HISTORY

The area bounded by Punt Road, The River Yarra, Toorak Road and the Sandringham Railway line comprises four of the six lots sold in the first sale of Crown lands in 1840. These large allotments originally stretched from Gardiner's Creek (now Toorak) Road to frontages along the Yarra River.¹

At an early date, a few houses were constructed on South Yarra Hill on elevated sites to the north of the present-day alignment of Domain Road. One was 'Yarra Bank', the home from 1843 of Major Alexander Davidson, who purchased Lot 1 (bounded by Punt Road and present-day Caroline Street) from Crown Grantee, RH Browne.² In 1870, this property contained a residence

¹ George Tibbits, *History of Prahran*, pg.26. Map shows the area in June 1840.

² Context Pty Ltd, Prahran Conservation Review, 1992, pg. Urban Conservation Areas/2, cites RGO Search 320.

and 12 acres of garden, orchard and vineyard.³ Yarra Bank no longer exists. Another very early house, 'Avoca', built on Lot 2, survives in Gordon Grove. It was the home from about 1848 of William Montgomery Bell, a wealthy merchant.⁴ Lot 3 was purchased by GR Griffiths but was not developed for some years. It was sold to wine merchant John Robert Murphy who planted a vineyard along the northern slopes above the river. Lot 4 (to the east of present day Darling Street) was less readily developed, terminating in a steep escarpment above swampy land adjacent to the Yarra.

Subdivision of these early properties from the 1850s created housing allotments between the line of Domain Road and Toorak Road, leaving the earlier homes on large sites close to the river. These subdivisions featured wide streets and large allotments reflecting the affluence of the area. Domain Road was extended to Darling Street in 1887 but this generally remained the northern boundary to development. A hotel and a teahouse established on the south bank of the Yarra to the east of Punt Road both failed. Swampy ground and difficult terrain provided a challenge to subdivision and development to the north of Domain Road.

The MMBW plan of 1896 shows the low residential densities to the north of Domain Road. Development had occurred in an orderly fashion close to Punt Road but sites above the river retained a rural character. Land along the escarpment was dominated by the early residence, *Avoca*. A racecourse (presumed to be part of the Avoca Estate) occupied land in the northern sections of Lot 4. Apart from Avoca, few other dwellings had been constructed on the north side of Domain Road.

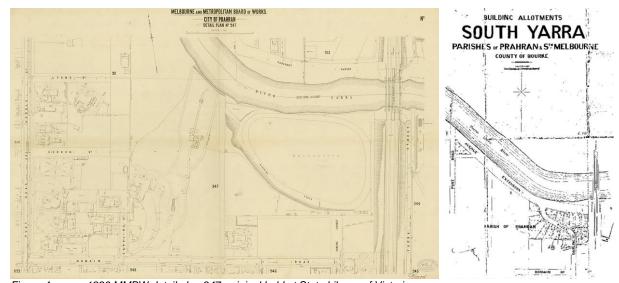


Figure 4 1896 MMBW detail plan 947, original held at State Library of Victoria.

Figure 5 Detail, Building Allotments, South Yarra, 1913, original held at Stonnington History Centre.

From 1896, the Yarra Improvement Act empowered the MMBW to undertake major widening and realignment works. Alexandra Avenue was formed in 1903. However, until 1914, the Avenue extended only to the railway bridge. In 1918, the bridge was altered to allow the passage of traffic

³ Context Pty Ltd, op cit, Urban Conservation Areas/2 cites Betty Malone, The North-West corner, unpublished manuscript.

⁴ George Tibbits, op cit, pg.36.

⁵ Betty Malone, *Discovering Prahran No 1*, pg.1-2.

⁶ Context Pty Ltd, Stonnington Thematic Environmental History, pg.20.

through to Chapel Street.⁷ This development provided the impetus to extend Caroline and Darling Streets through to Alexandra Avenue creating blocks for sale in these streets and along the riverside thoroughfare. Many of these allotments were purchased by Howard R Lawson and his business partner Reginald W Biffen and redeveloped with blocks of flats. Others, on the east side of Darling Street, were purchased by the City of Prahran to form the Darling Gardens.

Howard Lawson practised as an architect but moved into property development, promoting himself as the 'architect who builds'.⁸ His work includes a large number of bungalows and flats in Melbourne's inner and southern suburbs dating from the 1910s and 1920s. Despite his prolific output, Lawson's role as a developer was viewed unfavourably by the architectural profession and his applications for registration as an architect in 1923 and 1924 were rejected.

Lawson's earliest buildings on Darling Street include 'Avignon' (c.1922) at No 51 and 'The Chateau' (c.1923, understood to be No 49). These took the form of small-scale Californian bungalow-inspired maisonettes.

From 1934, after the depression, development along Alexandra Avenue continued with the construction of 'Granada Court', 'Dorrington House', 'Devonshire House', 'The Manor', 'Warwick Lodge', 'Kildare' and 'York House'. All utilised standard precast concrete decorative details of Plateresque and Churrigueresque origin to enliven simple, block-like forms. This phase of development culminated with 'Beverly Hills' (1935-36) which comprised three blocks located on a precipitous site rising from Darling Street. It was extraordinary in terms of its scale, form and detailing and for its landscaped setting using the Darling Gardens and the broader Yarra environs to create a unified and dramatic setting for the buildings. The development incorporated a range of exotic details drawn from Hollywood and popularised locally by magazines. References to Hollywood were heightened by the incorporation of a pool for tenants into the design.

Several other blocks of flats were built on remaining lots on Alexandra Avenue from 1940 including 'Maritama' and 'Stratton Heights'. These were more Moderne in form and detailing, but retained some of the Mediterranean flavour of Lawson's earlier designs through the use of classical balusters to sweeping balconies.

Howard Lawson was declared bankrupt from 1930 until 1945, largely as a result of failed theatre and dance hall enterprises. During this period, Lawson's sons conducted a business involving the construction and maintenance of blocks of flats. Consequently, there is some difficulty in attributing the design of the flats from this period directly to Howard Lawson. However, bankruptcy files indicate that Lawson retained involvement with the family pursuit of flat design through this period. They state:

It is noted that big buildings are being erected in Toorak by Lawson Bros who are sons of the bankrupt. I understand from information available that the bankrupt is in constant touch with the erection of these premises ...

Files also refer to Lawson as 'working in conjunction with his sons in connection with building flats' and also as being regarded as a 'guiding influence' in the business.

⁷ Betty Malone, op cit, pg.15.

⁸ Details of Lawson's Life and work are drawn with minor editing from, Bryce Raworth, *Analysis of the proposal to demolish the existing flats at, 59 Darling Street, South Yarra*, July 2006.

Howard Lawson's work was abruptly curtailed by WWII. The block of flats at 59 Darling Street (demolished, 2010) appears to be one of a small number of projects attributed to the family business after the war. It is unlikely to have had any substantial association with Howard Lawson who died in 1946, aged 60. The building appears to have been constructed c.1951 for Howard's son, Ernest Lawson.⁹

While the flavour of the precinct derives from Lawson's activities during the 1920s and 1930s, South Yarra Hill was not developed exclusively by Lawson. Flats by others such as those at 56 Darling Street (1940)¹⁰ and others at 53 and 55 Alexandra Avenue (c.1930) extend the themes and typologies set in motion by Lawson.

ANALYSIS

Thematic context

The precinct illustrates the following themes identified in the City of Stonnington Thematic Environmental History (Context Pty Ltd, 2006).

- 2.1.3 Making Roads and Railways
- 8.1.3 The end of an era mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century.
- 8.6.2 Developing apartment living.
- 8.6.3 Architect designed apartments.

Flats in Stonnington

Council's Thematic Environmental History notes:

The first apartment buildings or flats began to be constructed in Melbourne in the first decades of the twentieth century. ¹¹ In many Municipalities, restrictive building codes were enacted to control or stop this new form of development, ostensibly for safety reasons, though there may have also been social overtones ... The Municipalities of Prahran and St Kilda were two that allowed and, to a certain extent, encouraged flat development to occur.

One of the first purpose-built flats in (Stonnington) and indeed the whole of Melbourne was Fawkner Mansions built of the corner of Punt and Commercial Roads in Prahran for George Fairbairn Jr in 1912. The flats were nicknamed Faibrairn's Folly, but the apartments were occupied by professional and semi professional families. However, widespread development of purpose-built flats did not really begin until the 1920s. Among the first were those built by architect/property developer Howard R Lawson. In 1922, Lawson began designing California Bungalow Style maisonettes capable of conversion to flats, some of which remain in the area. After the depression, Lawson began designing multi-storey blocks including Beverley Hills ... By 1935, Lawson had built 175 flats in his subdivision ...

Apart from changing the physical character of the suburbs, the flats also changed the social mix by encouraging more people to live within the area. Until the development

⁹ Raworth, op cit.

¹⁰ MMBW House Cover, 56 Darling Street, October 1940.

¹¹ Context Pty Ltd, Thematic Environmental History, pgs144-5

of flats, the accommodation choices for single people were very limited, and the new form of accommodation provided additional freedom, particularly for unmarried women.

However, not all flats were designed with single people in mind. Flats also became fashionable for the wealthy in Toorak and South Yarra as a way of living in a prestigious suburb without the bother of a large house and garden or servants, although some flats did include a servant's room, such as Denby Dale in Kooyong. Flats in Toorak were therefore spacious and designed for families rather than single people. Caringal at 3 Tahara Road, which was designed in 1948 by John W Rivett, even had a children's playground on the roof. Its eighteen flats were all let before the building was completed.

Comparative analysis

Similar concentrated groupings of interwar flats with this high level of intactness are rare in the City of Stonnington. The Alexandra Avenue precinct of apartments to designs by Howard Lawson and others stands out as the most important example in the Municipality for its particularly unique combination of exotic architectural styles and dramatic siting on an escarpment above the Yarra River.

The Coolullah and Quamby Avenues precinct (HO382) near the intersection of Williams and Toorak Roads is less spectacular but nonetheless survives to a similar high level of intactness. It is representative of the more conservative type of development generally undertaken by flat builders in prestigious suburbs such as Toorak. The Coolullah and Quamby Avenues Precinct is unusual for its relatively high concentration of maisonette-type flats.

Kenleigh Grove (HO141) is more mixed than either of the two areas noted above with flats and free-standing villas. It compares broadly with Quamby Avenue for the extent to which it retains straightforward examples of duplex building stock of an interwar Moderne architectural character.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The northern sections of HO122 around Darling Street and Alexandra Avenue were substantially constructed by a single architect. They are reasonably uniform in terms of their character and building typologies. The area benefits from the landscaped character of Alexandra Avenue, Darling Gardens and the Yarra bank environs more generally.

Streetscapes to their south, centred on Domain Road, Punt Road, Caroline Street and Avoca Street, are more diverse comprising important early buildings alongside handsome interwar residences and flats. This area comprises a broad collection of substantial, high-quality dwellings dating from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Much of this area is currently protected under HO355 although some areas, most notably those in Domain Road, Punt Road and the northern sections of Caroline Street are included in HO122.

It is recommended that the southern boundary of HO122 is contracted to the extent shown in Figure 1. The boundary to HO355 should also be reconsidered to capture appropriate built form to the north of the current boundary (refer separate document). This would allow for the rationalisation of built form within each precinct and for the removal of some anomalous, often lowly graded, buildings captured within the current boundaries from heritage control.

These and other, minor matters are discussed in more detail below.

Buildings and areas to be retained in HO122

Properties at 49-81 Alexandra Avenue 49-69 Darling Street (west side) 56 Darling Street (east side), 1-3 Lawson Grove. 280-286 Domain Road; 522-6 Punt Road 2-4 Dobson Street and 122-4 Caroline Street, along with the adjacent section of the Yarra River bank, the Darling Gardens and the railway bridge should be retained in HO122.

Buildings to be transferred from HO122 to HO355

With the exception of the buildings noted below, the balance of the buildings currently in HO122 should be transferred into HO355. Refer separate document for the schedule of buildings to that precinct.

Buildings and areas to be removed from heritage controls

A number of modern blocks of flats are included within the current boundaries of HO122. Although these buildings conform to the same broad typology as the more highly valued residential flats in this locale, they are often reasonably generic buildings with few of the characteristics which distinguish the Lawson buildings or the area more broadly. Where these buildings occur on the periphery of the revised boundaries of HO122 or HO355 they can be removed from the Heritage Overlay without impact on the heritage values of the area.

For these reasons, heritage controls should be removed from the following buildings/areas:

- c.1960s flats, 2A Dobson Street and adjacent vacant site, 520 Punt Road.
- c.1960s flats, 113, 115 and 117 Caroline Street.
- c.1960s flats, 274, 274A, 276, 276A and 278 Domain Road.

Another block of flats at 83 Alexandra Avenue, South Yarra was constructed in 1941, possibly to designs by architects, Marsh & Michaelson. It is currently included in HO122. The building was graded B in the City of Prahran Character and Conservation Study Building Grading Database despite overpainting and other minor alterations. It is a building of modest individual interest. It is located some distance from other graded buildings in HO122 and is isolated from those buildings by the grounds of the Melbourne High School and the physical barrier of the railway embankment. The building contributes little to HO122, either as defined by its current boundaries or the revised boundaries proposed by this document. It is not of sufficient significance to warrant an individual heritage control. In this light, the heritage control should be removed from this building. Likewise, adjacent sections of Alexandra Avenue and the Yarra River bank to the east of the Railway, which provide a setting for 83 Alexandra Avenue, should also be removed from the Heritage Overlay.

Other planning controls

It may be appropriate to consider an alternative or supplementary control for landscaped areas such as the river bank and Darling Gardens retained within HO122. These areas contribute substantially to the character and setting of the area. However, they contain little early fabric and may be more flexibly managed under an alternative control.

Building gradings

This document has been prepared to update Council's existing citation for HO122 prior to its being uploaded to the HERMES database. It has not sought to uncover new aspects of significance relating to this precinct but to provide a clearer and more comprehensive explanation of the heritage values identified previously - a neutral translation from Council's existing citations to the HERMES database. Consequently, the report does not include a review of existing gradings for individual buildings.

It is noted that some anomalous and inconsistent building gradings were noted during site inspections undertaken in the preparation of this report. However, this report has not identified or recommended revisions to these gradings. This could have the effect of increasing the previously-identified significance of some buildings. Consequently, the Schedule of Buildings below reproduces Council's existing gradings for the sites under consideration. This notwithstanding, Council should review the gradings in this area in order to address any inconsistencies. I would note that this does not appear to be a widespread concern and is probably limited to a handful of sites.

SCHEDULE OF BUILDINGS

Definitions of building gradings are explained in the *Stonnington Heritage Guidelines*. Building gradings reflect the intactness of the built form on the site and its streetscape context. Buildings have been graded according to their relationship to the identified significance of the precinct and the ability of the built form to demonstrate key historic themes in the development of the area. It should be noted that a property may exhibit characteristics other than built form (such as subdivision pattern, orientation, location) that also contribute to the historic themes and the significance of the precinct as a whole.

The term, flats, has been used to describe any buildings constructed to (or with the potential to) provide multiple residences within a single building. It is acknowledged that some buildings constructed as flats or maisonettes have subsequently been converted into individual residences. This may not be reflected in the descriptions below.

ALEXANDRA AVENUE

Street No	Grading	Description
49	A2	Interwar flats
51	A2	Interwar flats
53	A2	Interwar flats
55	С	Interwar flats
63	A1	Stratton Heights, Interwar flats
65	A2	Interwar flats
67	U	Interwar flats
71	В	Interwar flats
73	A2	Dorrington House, Interwar flats
75	A2	York House, Interwar flats
77	A2	Kildare, Interwar flats
79	A2	Narooma, Interwar flats
81	A2	Maritama, Interwar flats

CAROLINE STREET (east side)

Street No Grading Description
122 A2 Devonshire F

122 A2 Devonshire House, Interwar flats 124 A2 Durham Hall, Interwar flats

CAROLINE STREET (west side)

Street No Grading Description

119 A2 Dorrington House, Interwar flats

DARLING STREET (east side)

Street No Grading Description

56 A2 Bona Vista, flats (1940)

DARLING STREET (west side)

Street No	Grading	Description
49	С	The Chateau, interwar flats
49A	U	Modern villa
51	В	Avignon, Interwar flats
53	С	Interwar flats
55	U	c.1970s flats
57	U	c.1970s flats
59	U	Modern Apartments
61	A1	Beverley Hills, Interwar flats
63	A1	Beverley Hills, Interwar flats
65	A2	Santoy, Interwar flats
67	В	Interwar flats
69	В	Interwar flats

DOBSON STREET

Street No	Grading	Description
2	A2	Interwar flats
4-6	A2	Interwar flats

DOMAIN ROAD

DOMANTROAD			
Street No	Grading	Description	
280	A2	Two storey Victorian villa	
282	В	Single storey Edwardian villa	
284	В	Single storey Edwardian villa	
286	A2	Single storey Edwardian villa	

LAWSON GROVE

Street No	Grading	Description
1	A2	Warwick Lodge, Interwar shop/Interwar flats
2	A2	The Manor, Interwar flats
3	A2	Berkley House, Interwar flats

PUNT ROAD

Street No	Grading	Description
522	A2	Interwar flats
524	A2	Interwar flats
526	A2	Interwar flats

REFERENCES

Context Pty Ltd, Stonnington Thematic Environmental History, 2006.

Context Pty Ltd, Prahran Heritage Review, 1993.

Bryce Raworth, *Analysis of the proposal to demolish existing the flats at, 59 Darling Street, South Yarra,* report to the VCAT, July 2006.

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Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works, Detail Plan 947, 1896.

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Sands and McDougal, Postal Directories, various editions, 1920-1970.