

**95 ALEXANDRA AVENUE  
SOUTH YARRA**

**INTRODUCTION**

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This report has been prepared by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd to investigate the significance of the property at 95 Alexandra Avenue, Toorak, in order to determine the appropriateness of its inclusion within the schedule to the Heritage Overlay within the planning scheme. The report builds on work carried out by Context Pty Ltd in the *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, 1993.

The *City of Prahran Conservation Review* graded the building as A2+ (almost certainly of regional significance). It is not presently listed on the Victorian Heritage Register or the Register of the National Estate or classified by the National Trust.

**SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

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This report finds that 95 Alexandra Avenue is of regional significance and should be added to the schedule to the Heritage Overlay in the local section of the Stonnington Planning Scheme and nominated to the Australian Heritage Commission for inclusion in the register of the National Estate.

In addition, it finds that the building at 89 Alexandra Avenue, built for the same owner and in the same mode, should be added to the schedule to the Heritage Overlay in the local section of the Stonnington Planning Scheme and nominated to the Australian Heritage Commission for inclusion in the register of the National Estate.

## HISTORY

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The land currently known as 95 Alexandra Avenue was originally part of the Tivoli Estate. Tivoli was an early property dating from the 1840s, and one of several in the area overlooking the Yarra River.<sup>1</sup> In 1888 the Tivoli Estate was subdivided south of Victoria Terrace. A subsequent, 1926 subdivision created Copelen Street,<sup>2</sup> and the Methodist Babies Home was built on a large block at the end of the new street.<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Avenue was finally extended from Chapel Street to Williams Road in the early 1930s using unemployed labour. The long delayed construction was made possible by the Public Works Department agreeing to list the project under Relief Works.<sup>4</sup> The completion of Alexandra Avenue resulted in a subdivision near the river, including subdivision of the rear of allotments which had previously faced onto Copelen Street.

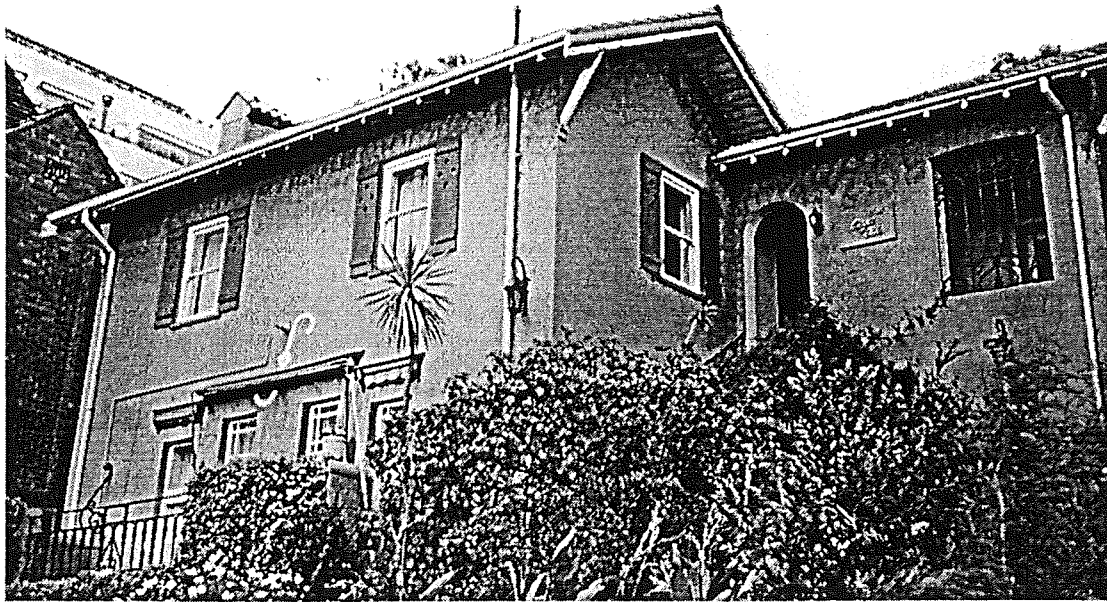
In 1933, lot 4 of the new frontages to Alexandra Avenue was owned by Regina Grover<sup>5</sup> and the following year the Casa de Rio flats were erected on the site.<sup>6</sup> The pair of flats at 95 Alexandra Avenue was the first building erected between River Street and Williams Road, and Gwendoline Whiley and Gordon Leonard were the first occupiers of the four room flats.<sup>7</sup> The owner of the building, Regina Grover, lived at 7 Copelen Street,<sup>8</sup> but Montague Grover, her husband, appears as owner on the MMBW house covers of this time. Montague Grover also owned a vacant allotment at 89 Alexandra Avenue,<sup>9</sup> and by 1935 two four-room flats had been erected at this second site for Grover.

## DESCRIPTION

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The flats at 95 Alexandra Avenue, otherwise known as the Casa de Rio, are located on a busy tree-lined thoroughfare overlooking the Yarra River. They occupy an elevated position and face the road at an angle allowing views from the house to nearby Herring Island. The building is simple in form and draws inspiration from the various Spanish Revival modes which became popular throughout South Yarra during the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>10</sup> While built as a pair of flats, great care has been taken to give the appearance of a single, substantial home in a manner which was practised widely throughout South Yarra and Toorak during the inter-war period.

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- 1 Kearney's map of 1855 and the MMBW plan of 1895 show Tivoli, Little Rockley, Bona Vista and further back, Como.
  - 2 Betty Malone, *From Como house to Como city, a study in diversity* Prahran Historical Society, 1989, p.5.
  - 3 Context Pty Ltd, Conservation Review, City of Prahran, vol. 3. p. 42-3.
  - 4 Sally Wilde, *The history of Prahran*, 1993, p.25.
  - 5 City of Prahran Rate book, Toorak Ward, 1933, no. 650.
  - 6 Ibid, 1933, nos 733 & 734.
  - 7 Ibid.
  - 8 Ibid
  - 9 Ibid., no. 737
  - 10 City of Prahran Rate Books, Toorak Ward, 1935-36; Context Pty Ltd, *City of Prahran Conservation Review*, Vol. 3, p 1.



*Illustration 1 Casa del Rio, 95 Alexandra Parade, South Yarra.  
Source: Author's Collection.*

The influence of the Spanish Revival is evident in details and finishes throughout the house. The roof is composed of two steeply pitched gables, the Cordoba tiles of which are clearly visible from the road. Cordoba tiles also appear as a capping to the end piers of the front fence. The walls are finished in a parged render recalling traditional Spanish construction techniques. Bold timber shutters, decorated with small diamond-shaped openings, flank many of the building's windows and arches have been incorporated into some of the house's fenestration and into the loggia at the front entrance. Decorative wrought iron detailing, found in both the loggia and a small elevated balcony at the front of the house has been painted black in the manner characteristic of the Spanish Mission and Spanish Colonial Revival styles.

Casa de Rio was built for Montague M. Grover in 1934-35. It belongs to a family of Spanish influenced houses and flats apparently built in this block by the Grover family immediately after the construction of Alexandra Avenue during the Depression. The allotment upon which it is found originally fronted 9 Copelen Street, and this frontage is still occupied by a Spanish Revival house of very similar character which was also built and occupied by the Grover family, Casa Nino. The overall allotment was subdivided into two at or after construction of 95 Alexandra Avenue. Casa Panzo, a striking two storey pair of flats at the corner of River Street and Alexandra Avenue is so similar to Casa del Rio in many of its details as to suggest it was built at the same time and designed by the same

architect. It was also developed by the Grover family.<sup>11</sup> The land fronting Alexandra Avenue between the two remained undeveloped in the mid-1930s.<sup>12</sup>

An examination of building permit records revealed no major alterations and it is likely that the building remains substantially original to its pre-war state.<sup>13</sup>

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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The buildings at 89 and 95 Alexandra Avenue are particularly fine examples of the Spanish Revival domestic modes influential in Melbourne from the early 1920s. While not especially early, they are finely detailed, substantially intact and clearly illustrate the stylistic and formal architectural aspirations of these modes. Located on Alexandra Avenue, they also echo the precedent for Spanish and Mediterranean influenced flat buildings established by Howard Lawson in the precinct between Punt Road and Darling Street, and are contemporary with some of Lawson's last additions within this precinct, including Beverley Hills (1935-36).

95 Alexandra Avenue is of particular interest in that it appears to have retained its original external finishes, including its coloured cement parging. While 89 Alexandra Avenue has been painted a monochrome white, it still retains the external decorative details and materials which distinguish the mode, and is perhaps even more striking than 95 Alexandra Avenue because of the bold manner in which it responds to its corner site.

The buildings at 89 and 95 Alexandra Avenue are not amongst the earliest examples of the broadly Spanish modes in Melbourne's suburbs, nor the largest nor, it would seem, the most influential. Nonetheless, their fine detailing, their general external integrity and the manner in which they exemplify the trend amongst progressive architects in this time toward a two storeyed domestic type strongly influenced by Spanish and Mediterranean design, and generally surmounted by simple gabled roofs, identify them as excellent representative examples of what Leighton Irwin characterised at this time as the 'Southern Victorian House'.<sup>14</sup> Their prominent siting and general sympathy with the character established by Lawson's nearby flat precinct contribute to their significance and interest.

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11 City of Prahran Rate Books, Toorak Ward, 1935-36.

12 Ibid.

13 Prahran Council Building Permits.

14 Raworth, 'A Question Of Style', pp 92-93, 133-137.

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

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Casa de Rio, 95 Alexandra Avenue, and Casa Panzo, 89 Alexandra Avenue, are of regional significance as two prominent, finely designed and detailed and substantially externally intact examples of small flat development constructed upon the opening up of frontages to the Alexandra Avenue extension in the early 1930s. They exemplify the influence of various Spanish Revival and Mediterranean modes in Melbourne, modes that had gained popularity in the architect designed domestic work of the 1920s but had been consolidated as a builders mode popular for flats and houses alike by the 1930s.

## REFERENCES

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City of Prahran Rate Books

Context Pty Ltd *Conservation Review, City of Prahran*

Betty Malone, *From Como house to Como city, a study in diversity* Prahran Historical Society, 1989.

Sands & McDougall Directories

Bryce Raworth, 'A Question Of Style', unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993.

Sally Wilde, *The history of Prahran*, Melbourne 1993.