

35-39 Albany Road, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 35-39 Albany Road, Toorak.

History and Historical Context

Thematic Context

The following is drawn from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (Context Pty Ltd, 2006).

The End of an Era – Mansion Estates Subdivision in the Early Twentieth Century

Toorak has been described as *'the only suburb to acquire and keep a name which was synonymous in the public mind with wealth, extravagance and display'*.¹ The suburb's climb to fashionable pre-eminence was due to its pleasing topographic features and the presence of the Governor's residence from 1854 (Toorak House, after which the suburb is named). Toorak and the higher parts of South Yarra were settled by pastoralists, army officers, high-ranking professionals, and 'self made' merchants and traders. Their wealth was manifested in the construction of a suitably impressive mansion, usually set within expansive grounds. As Victoria's land boom progressed into the late 1880s, the mansions became more elaborate, one of the best surviving examples being *Illawarra* (1 Illawarra Crescent), built by land-boomer Charles Henry James in 1891.

After the collapse of the land boom, many mansions were put to other uses, subdivided or demolished. The subdivision of the old estates of Toorak began to increase after World War I when the cost of maintaining these large properties became prohibitive.

¹ Paul de Serville, *Pounds and Pedigrees: The Upper Class in Victoria 1850-1880*, p.147.

This process of subdivision created a unique pattern of development which can still be understood and interpreted today. Although new subdivisions imposed new road patterns within the original grids, in many cases new estates and streets bore the name of the old properties, while the original houses were sometimes retained within a reduced garden. Toorak nonetheless retained its appeal as a wealthy enclave.

Creating Australia's most designed suburb

Toorak is notable for the strong culture of patronage between architects and their wealthy clients, which existed from the earliest times of settlement. This has resulted in a much higher than average ratio of architect designed houses. In Albany Road alone, 47 of the 61 houses built since 1872 have been attributed to architects. The consequence of this is one of the strongest concentrations of high quality residential architecture in Australia, which provides an important record of all major architectural styles and movements since the earliest days of settlement.

Architects were particularly busy in Toorak in the boom years of the 1880s when ever more prosperous merchants, businessmen and land speculators sought to create houses that would stand as testament to their wealth, status and fashionable taste. A great many examples of nineteenth century domestic architecture in the Municipality were lost through demolition, however many of these demolitions created opportunities for twentieth century architects.

After the turn of the century, architects continued to have a major influence on the wealthy suburbs within present day Stonnington. Walter Butler, Robert Hamilton, Marcus Martin and Rodney Alsop were among the notable architects whose work is represented in Toorak. These architects built predominately in the fashionable architecture styles of the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the Georgian revival and Old English modes.

Place History

The property at 35-39 Albany Road originally formed part of the Kenley mansion estate, which was built in 1876 for barrister Hartley Williams. Kenley was a graceful, single storey house encircled by shady verandahs, with a conservatory, stables and coach-house and extensive shrubbery and gardens.²

The Kenley estate was subdivided into 22 allotments that were offered for sale in 1938 as 'Toorak's Premier Subdivision'. The mansion was subsequently demolished.

In 1940, architect Geoffrey Sommers submitted plans for a new house in Albany Road for Mrs S O Wood.³ Mrs Woods was the daughter of wealthy pastoralist Alexander Thompson Creswick, and the widow of Samuel Octavius Wood, veterinarian surgeon to the Victorian Racing Club. Sands and McDougall directories show a 'house being built' in 1941 on an unnumbered property on the west side of Albany Road (likely to be present day 35-39 Albany Road).

Samuel Woods died in June 1940 leaving an estate valued at £81,283.⁴ His wife [Helen] died in September the following year at the age of 83 in her Albany Road house.⁵ The 1942 Sands and McDougall directory lists 35-39 Albany Road as vacant. The directories for 1943 and 1944 name the occupant as Sir Ronald Cross, High Commissioner for the United Kingdom.

² Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. MH 14217

³ Stonnington Local History Catalogue. Reg. No. MB 5233

⁴ *Argus*, 22 August 1940, p.5.

⁵ *Argus*, 18 September 1941, p.4.

From c1947, 35-39 Albany Road became the home of newspaper magnate Sir Keith Murdoch. After Sir Keith's death in October 1952, the house was sold in January 1953 for £35,000.⁶ Auction notices described its as an 'outstanding achievement of building craftsmanship'.⁷

Geoffrey Sommers

Geoffrey Newton Sommers (1904-1984) was a Geelong born architect, best remembered for his 1930s and post war domestic work in wealthy suburbs like Toorak and South Yarra. He commonly blended a discrete Georgian flavour with the simple gable roofed asymmetrical house, often painted white. He generally attempted to achieve a stylistic compromise between the strong Georgian tradition of the Melbourne area and the influence of international modernism. Sommers was still practising as an architect into his seventies.⁸

Description

The house at 35-39 Albany Road, Toorak is a large and elegantly designed Georgian Revival style building. It is positioned towards the front of a generous garden with a curved gravel driveway in the front setback contributing to the overall sense of formality. The house has a transverse gabled slate roof and red-brick walls embellished with refined Classically inspired stone dressings. The symmetrically composed front elevation has a gabled entry bay at its centre with fluted pilasters and a swan neck pediment framing the door. The window above has paired pilasters and an arched head. The entry bay is flanked on either side by evenly spaced timber multi-pane double-hung sash windows. The first floor windows have relatively simple stone architraves with key stone motifs. The ground floor windows are taller and have more elaborate architraves with spandrel panels and cornice mouldings. The principal gable roofed façade has lower height double-storey wings at either end, also with gable roofs. These end wings have distinctive first floor window aedicules with curved pediments breaking through the eaves line. A double-storey rear wing set perpendicular to the principal gable originally contained the servants' accommodation.

The exterior is essential intact to its original c1941 appearance insofar as it presents to the street. The original architect's drawings appear to show window shutters but these may have been omitted before construction. A building permit was issued in 2011 for a small lift abutting the rear elevation, in a location entirely concealed from the street. The low brick front fence and looped driveway configuration are presumably original (the latter appears unchanged from a 1945 aerial photograph).⁹ The original gabled four-car garage survives at the rear south east corner of the property.

Comparative Analysis

The interwar Georgian revival style is closely related to the Colonial revival and Mediterranean styles. It was particularly fashionable during the interwar period in the wealthy middle ring suburbs of Toorak, South Yarra and Armadale when it became synonymous with upper middle class concepts of good taste.

The interest in the Colonial Georgian resulted in part from a continued desire for the creation of a national idiom through a search for a local vernacular, which in Australia was equated with Colonial buildings of the early nineteenth century. Various factors prompted a re-investigation of Colonial and Georgian modes. A precedent had been set by British architects such as Edwin Lutyens of abandoning medieval inspiration of the Arts and Crafts style for a

⁶ *Argus*, 25 February, 1953, p.11.

⁷ *Argus*, 31 January, 1953, p.19.

⁸ *The Age*, 30 September 1980, p.19.

⁹ University of Melbourne Library, Map Collection, Melbourne 1945 photo maps 849a3c.

return to classicism. Australian architects also looked to the United States where a vigorous Colonial Georgian revival had been underway since the late-nineteenth century.

By the First World War, the revived Georgian style was well established in Britain, often being used for houses, blocks of flats and commercial buildings of modest size. In Australia, William Hardy Wilson is credited with a major role in popularising the Georgian revival idiom through his rediscovering and recording of early nineteenth century architecture in New South Wales and Tasmania, and through his admiration for American Colonial architecture encountered on his overseas travels.

Georgian revival buildings began to appear in Melbourne from about the end of the First World War. Architects drew eclectically from British Georgian, French and even Spanish architecture for motifs which to aggrandise the basic Georgian box. Almost invariably the idiom was represented by a two storey rectilinear form of brick or stucco with a simple hip or single ridge gable roofs and symmetry or near symmetry in the arrangement of doors, windows and balconies. House in this idiom typically featured restrained classical or Adamesque detailing, quoins at corners and around entries, and a porte cochere, often with balconies above. Other common characteristics include gabled porticos and simple wrought ironwork. Occasionally elements of the Mediterranean or modern styles might be introduced in an attempt at variety of expression but the end result was always suitably restrained.

Individually significant interwar Georgian revival style houses in Stonnington include: 7 Glenbervie Road (1924) [HO311] and 8 Glyndebourne Avenue, Toorak (c1926) [HO265], both by Marcus Martin. His designs are tempered by modernist tendencies towards simplification and are noticeably more restrained in ornament than 35-39 Albany Road. They are also relatively modest in scale. 35-39 Albany is not as progressive as some contemporary Toorak houses but is, nonetheless, distinguished from common representative examples of the Georgian idiom in the municipality by virtue of its grand scale and the appliqué of refined classical ornament onto the archetypal gable roofed Georgian box. It compares most favourably with the equally large Georgian revival style house at 17 St Georges Road by architects Hughes and Orme (1936) [individually listed on the heritage overlay schedule as HO98]. This building has a rigidly symmetrical facade with a central entrance enclosed within pilasters and an entablature. The windows are multi-paned and shuttered in the conventional Georgian manner. It is on the whole uncompromisingly revivalist, with no trace of modern influence.

Thematic Context

The house at 35-39 Albany Road, Toorak illustrates the following themes, as identified in the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (Context Pty Ltd, 2006):

- 8.1.3 - The end of an era – mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century
- 8.4.1 - Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion

To a lesser extent, the house also demonstrates the following theme:

- 6.3 - Constructing Capital City Economies

Assessment Against Criteria

Assessment of the place was undertaken in accordance with the HERCON criteria and the processes outlined in the Australian ICOMOS (Burra) Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Heritage Significance.

Statement of Significance

Note that the relevant HERCON criteria and themes from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (TEH) are shown in brackets.

What is Significant?

The large double-storey Georgian revival style house at 35-39 Albany Road, Toorak was constructed c1941 to designs by accomplished architect Geoffrey Sommers. It was built on land subdivided from the grounds of the 1870s mansion Kenley, and was Sir Keith Murdoch's home in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Elements that contribute to the significance of the place include (but are not limited to):

- The original external form, materials and detailing of the building.
- The extraordinary high level of external intactness.
- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of garden).
- The absence of modern vehicle accommodation in views to the house from the street and the understated presence of the original garage.
- The low brick front fence.
- The configuration of the curved front driveway.

How is it significant?

The house at 35-39 Albany Road, Toorak is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

The house is architecturally significant as a skilfully designed and extremely well preserved interwar Georgian revival style house (Criterion D). The carefully composed symmetrical façade, refined classical detailing and the formal driveway loop contribute to a strong sense of Georgian propriety.

The house is of some historical interest as evidence of a major phase of development that took place in the 1920s and 1930s when many of Toorak's grand nineteenth century mansion estates were subdivided to create prestigious residential enclaves (TEH 8.1.3 The end of an era – mansion estate subdivisions in the twentieth century, Criterion A). It also illustrates the role of houses generally, and refined Georgian revival style houses in particular, as symbols of wealth, status and taste for Melbourne's middle and upper classes of the interwar period (TEH 8.4.1 - Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion).

The house derives some additional historical interest from its association with Sir Keith Murdoch (6.3 - Constructing Capital City Economies, Criterion H).

Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay of the Stonnington Planning Scheme to the extent of the whole property as defined by the title boundary excluding the land presently occupied by the tennis court (at the rear of 33 Albany Road) [refer figure 2 below]. External paint controls, internal alteration controls and tree controls are not recommended. It is further recommended that an A2 grading be assigned to the house.

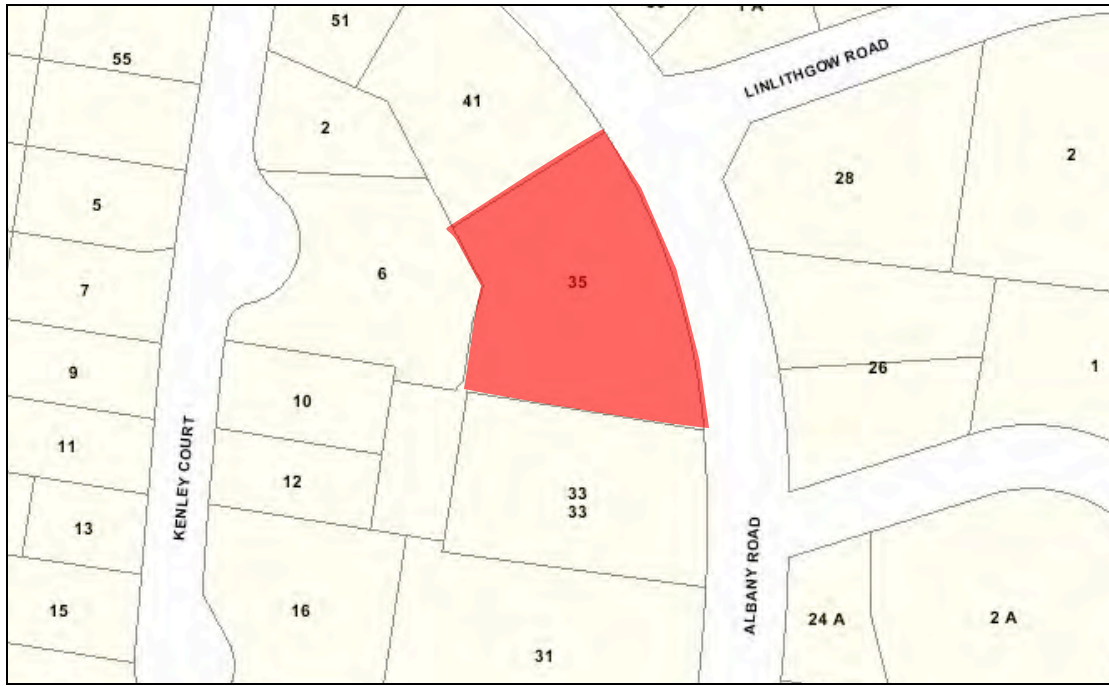


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 35-39 Albany Road, Toorak.