

11 Grosvenor Court, Toorak Heritage Citation Report



Figure 1 11 Grosvenor Court, 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. 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

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

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 well 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 11 Grosvenor Court originally formed part of Crown Allotment 25, bound by present day Toorak Road to the north, Glenferrie Road to the east, Malvern Road to the south and the line of Denham Place to the west. It was first purchased in 1849 for £151 by John Sullivan, assistant to the Colonial Surgeon for the Port Phillip District. In 1853, in the wake of the gold rushes, English barrister Charles Skinner paid a vastly inflated sum of £10,972 for Sullivan's land.

On Lot 25 Skinner planned a village to be named Ledbury after the market town on the southern slopes of the Malvern Hills in England. Skinner's Malvern Hills Estate was subdivided in mainly small allotments with streets named after family members. As an inducement to purchasers, Skinner built the Malvern Hill Hotel on the corner of present day Glenferrie Road and Malvern Road. However, Skinner's vision of an English style village complete with church and school did not succeed, and much of the land eventually reverted to pasture.

In 1883, fifteen acres of land at the corner of Glenferrie Road, and Toorak Road were purchased by George Meares. Meares erected a twenty room mansion on the property, named 'Grosvenor', and lived there until his death in 1903. By 1920, Grosvenor has been sold to theatrical entrepreneur Sir George Tallis. Grosvenor mansion was sold in 1935 and the estate subdivided, creating Grosvenor Court. Restrictions on the type of houses to be erected were imposed by the vendor and it was anticipated that new homes on the estate would 'leave nothing to be desired in modern architecture'.²

²Stonnington Local History Catalogue, Reg. No.MP 13016

In 1936, Grosvenor Investments sold lot 13 in Grosvenor Court to merchant Arthur Bruce Wenzel, and in August 1936 plans were submitted for a residence on the site by Bernard Sutton ARAIA.³ This house was featured in the *Argus* in November 1936, in which the reviewer praised the house's 'simple dignity' and distinctive limestone walls:

*The use of a new building material for houses always excites considerable interest and curiosity, but for the home... which is being erected in Grosvenor Court, near the corner of Toorak and Glenferrie roads, Toorak, one of the old materials – stone is being used with pleasing results.*⁴

In 1940, plans were submitted to Malvern Council for additions to the house for Arthur Wenzel. The plans show the garden porch off the lounge room being glazed-in as well as a small addition to the rear.⁵ Bernard Sutton prepared plans for alterations to the interior in 1953, plus the addition of a sun-room adjacent to the front sitting room and extension of the side porch.

Arthur and Valerie Wenzel owned 11 Grosvenor Court for over fifty years until it was sold in 1988.

Council records show that a small addition was built to the rear of the garage c1994.⁶ Plans were submitted for a larger extension to the house in 1998.⁷ Completed c2000, the works involved single and double-storey rear additions with minimal change to the front of the existing house.

Description

The house at 11 Grosvenor Court is an imposing double-storey Arts and Crafts style residence with limestone clad walls. The street elevation is dominated by a central projecting full height gable and two subordinate lower gables which flank this central element. The three gables project from the principal transverse gable. The roof is steeply pitched and slate clad. The windows are of simple-steel framed casements of a neo-Georgian design. The rear garage is original and has a slate roof facing the street. The front fence is of random coursed ashlar construction with colour variations creating a rustic effect in contrast with the dressed limestone walls of the house.

Comparative Analysis

The Arts and Crafts movement had its origins in the mid-1800s in England, with writer and designer William Morris as its figurehead. Morris strove to address the lowering of standards of design and the loss of craftsmanship resulting from industrialisation and the ascendancy of cheap mass produced goods. The Arts and Crafts movement was concerned with the integration of art into everyday life through the medium of craftsmanship, and had a strong moral tone with a stress on the truthfulness of expression. In Australia, the Arts and Crafts movement emerged in the eastern states in the late 1890s and flourished until the outbreak of World War I.⁸

The Art and Crafts movement was defined more by a set of ideals and principles than an adherence to uniform style, but its buildings have many common characteristics. Buildings in this idiom are typically domestic in scale and make free use of traditional vernacular motifs to

³Stonnington History Centre, Malvern Building Plan 100300050.

⁴*Argus*, 19 November 1936, p.4.

⁵Stonnington History Centre, Malvern Building Plan 100300050

⁶City of Stonnington Property File 313BL.

⁷City of Stonnington Property File 1040.10BL

⁸ Harriet Edquist, *Pioneers of Modernism – The Arts and Crafts Movement in Australia*, p.xii.

create something that was homely but at the same time distinctive and 'modern'. Artful informality and picturesqueness are strong characteristics, with symmetrical formality occurring less frequently. Buildings were typically conceived as objects 'in the round' rather than concentrating all architectural effect on a single street facade. The roof is a dominant element and could be either gabled or hipped or a combination of the two. Roughcast rendered walls, bay windows, timber shingles, battered piers and tall tapering chimneys are common. Art Nouveau inspired details are also common, both externally and internally.⁹ A characteristic of Melbourne Arts and Crafts architecture was the diversity of approach and the high quality of design and craftsmanship.¹⁰ Major figures in the Melbourne Arts and Crafts scene include architects Harold Desbrowe Annear, Walter Butler, Rodney Alsop and Robert Haddon. The Arts and Crafts movement was strongest pre-World War 1 but continued to exert a strong influence on the English Domestic revival architecture of 1930s.

11 Grosvenor Court has a spare and elegant quality derived from the strong massing, stone cladding and steel framed windows. The simplicity of the detailing, especially the absence of fascias at the gable ends strengthens the imposing design. It has a quality that can be found in refined early twentieth century English work where Arts and Crafts principles were adapted to a modernist approach, stripped of fussy detailing. It is similar to the 1933 house at 3 Benson Avenue, designed by Walter and Richard Butler. 11 Grosvenor Court lacks the rusticated random blocks of 3 Benson Avenue but is more refined with respect to details and materials. The use of ashlar stone cladding at this period for domestic architecture is of special note.

Thematic Context

The house at 11 Grosvenor 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

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 house at 11 Grosvenor Court, Toorak is a double-storey limestone clad Arts and Crafts style building. It was designed by architect Bernard Sutton and built c1936 on land subdivided from the nineteenth century mansion Grosvenor.

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 (notably the unpainted state of the limestone walls).
- The high level of external intactness of the front and side elevations.

⁹ Apperly et al., *A Pictorial Guide to Identifying Australian Architecture*, p.140.

¹⁰ Harriet Edquist, 'Arts and Crafts' in *Encyclopaedia of Australian Architecture*, p. 45.

- The domestic garden setting (but not the fabric of the garden itself)
- The absence of modern vehicle accommodation in views from Grosvenor Court.
- The stone front fence.

How is it significant?

The house at 11 Grosvenor Court, Toorak is of local architectural significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Architecturally, the house is significant as a striking Arts and Crafts style composition, notable for its strong gabled forms, simple detailing, unusual ashlar limestone walls and its overall high integrity (Criterion D, Criterion E).

The house is also 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). Additionally, the place illustrates the role of architect designed houses as symbols of wealth, status and taste for Melbourne's upper classes of the interwar period (TEH 8.4.1 - Houses as a symbol of wealth, status and fashion).

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 boundaries as shown in 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.

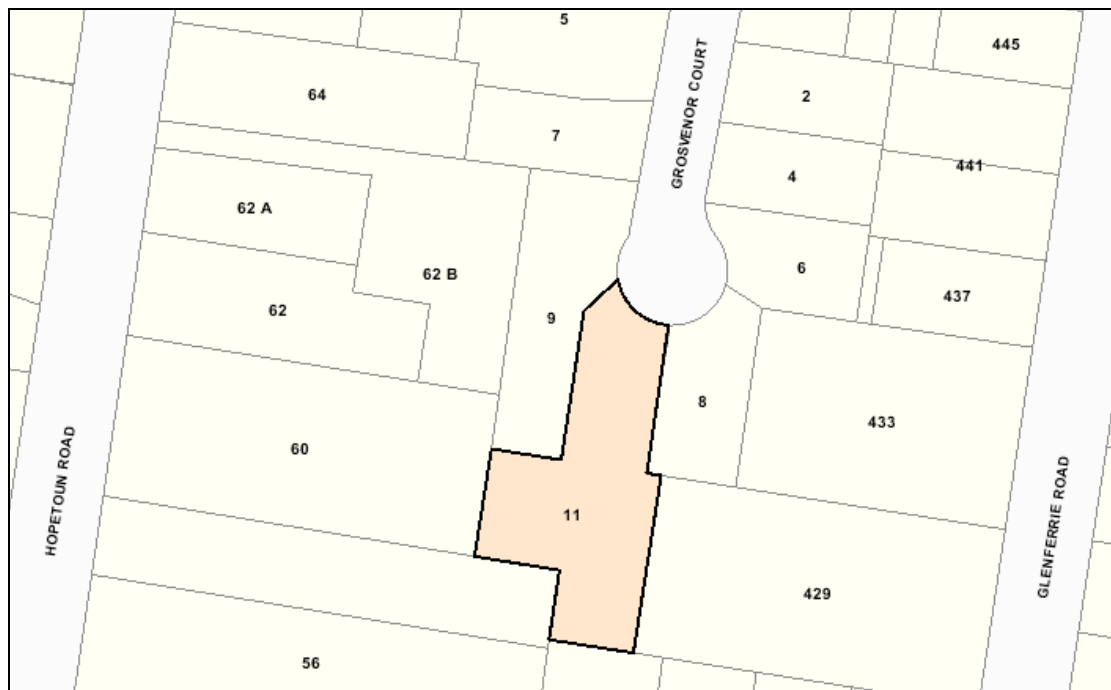


Figure 2 Recommended extent of heritage overlay for 11 Grosvenor Court, Toorak.