Kensington Close

Prepared by: GJM Heritage (March 2025)

Address: 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra

Name:	Kensington Close	**Survey Date:**	July 2024
Place Type:	Residential	**Architect/Designer:**	Graeme Gunn & Ellis Stones for Merchant Builders
Grading:	Significant (HO802)	**Builder:**	Merchant Builders
Extent of the Overlay:	To property boundaries	**Construction Date(s):**	1968-69



Figure 1. Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra (GJM Heritage, July 2024)

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra, constructed 1968-69.

Elements that contribute to the significance of the place include:

- Group of two-storey townhouses designed in a post-war Modernist style

- Townhouses arranged in rows north and south of a central bluestone pitcher-paved driveway
- Simple geometric compositions with low-pitched, metal tray deck-clad roof forms and deep eaves with broad fascias
- Pale brick construction with stained timberwork and beige-coloured steel tray deck wall cladding
- High brick parapet walls, wing walls and garden walls providing privacy
- Expansive glazing including bands of windows below the eaves and at ground level
- Prominent sections of raked wall below the windows, clad with metal decking, between raked wing walls
- Integrated carports recessed under upper levels
- Integrated landscaped setting including north-facing courtyards
- Mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra*) and oak (*Quercus sp*.) trees dating from earlier residences on the site
- High brick garden walls to the street boundary and courtyards with sections of horizontal timber fencing to courtyards.

How is it significant?

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is of local historical, representative (architectural) and aesthetic significance to the City of Stonnington.

Why is it significant?

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra has a clear association with the project homes industry in Victoria and higher-density development in the post-war period in the City of Stonnington. Constructed by highly influential project home building company Merchant Builders in 1968-69, Kensington Close is an early example of townhouse developments which became widespread across Melbourne in the late 1960s and 1970s following changes to the *Strata Titles Act 1967.* The townhouses demonstrate the shift towards more affordable and higher density living, which characterised suburban development throughout the City of Stonnington, and Melbourne more broadly, in the late-twentieth century (Criterion A).

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is a fine and highly intact example of a Modernist townhouse development constructed during the post-war period. The complex displays the key characteristics of a Modernist style townhouse development from this period including rows of attached two-storey residences accessed via a communal thoroughfare, simple, geometric plan forms, low-pitched metal-clad roofs with deep eaves with broad fascias, expansive glazing including bands of highlight windows, integrated and recessed carports, wing walls and high garden walls enclosing north-facing courtyards to provide privacy and a restrained material palette of pale brick, timber and steel tray deck-cladding (Criterion D).

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is of aesthetic significance as a sophisticated and well-executed example of Modernist style townhouse development of the 1960s. Designed for Merchant Builders by renowned architect Graeme Gunn, the townhouses are characterised by their repetitive use of bold angled forms with raked walls and wing walls, their neutral colour palette of pale brickwork, beige steel tray deck-cladding, stained timberwork and bluestone pitcher-paving, and their integrated landscaped setting designed by renowned landscape designer Ellis Stones, including private north-facing courtyards and a mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra)* and Oak (*Quercus sp.*) tree from earlier gardens on the site. Kensington Close demonstrates the key aesthetic qualities of Modernist design in the City of Stonnington to a very high standard (Criterion E).

Historical Context

This place is associated with the following historic theme(s) taken from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History* (2009):

8 Building suburbs

- 8.4.2 Functional, eccentric, and theatrical – experimentation and innovation in architecture
- 8.6 Developing higher density living

It is also associated with the following historic theme(s) taken from the *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History: Post-war Addendum (Draft, December 2024)*:

6.0 Building towns, cities and the garden state

- 6.7.2 Functional, eccentric, theatrical: post-war experimentation and innovation
- 6.7.6 Speculative housing and the modern project home after 1945

Contextual History

Developing higher-density living options in the post-war period

After World War II, higher density living options became increasingly popular in suburban Melbourne, enabling larger populations to be housed economically and conveniently throughout the suburbs in the wake of severe housing shortages. Houses on suburban blocks were demolished to enable the construction of multi-storey blocks of flats (particularly in the 1950s and 1960s) and groups of single-storey villas or two-storey townhouses (in the 1960s and 1970s). The introduction of the Stratum Title in 1960 and the *Strata Title Act 1967* further stimulated higher density development throughout the suburbs, with units able to be sold separately for the first time.

This housing type superseded the ‘maisonette’ and ‘duplex’ flat types that had been popular in the interwar period.

Project housing in the post-war period

The emergence of project housing played an influential role in the Modern architectural response to the housing issues of the time. From the 1950s, well-known architects including Robin Boyd, Graeme Gunn and Peter McIntyre began to focus their attention and skills on the concept of well-designed but affordable homes. Working closely with project builders, these architects began designing small, deceptively simple houses that offered economical and contemporary designs suited to a suburban family lifestyle and which were of better quality than the typical speculatively built house. As noted in *Designer Suburbs: Architects and Affordable Homes in Australia* (2012):

> *The project home was synonymous to many with the embodiment of the ‘Australian dream’, that saw home ownership as the foundation of family life. It became a new cultural phenomenon through the link between affordable construction and architectural ideas representing aspirations about living in suburbia* (O’Callaghan & Pickett 2012:vii).

Several project home companies operated in Melbourne in the post-war period. This included Contemporary Homes Pty Ltd (established 1955), the highly influential Merchant Builders Pty Ltd (architect Graeme Gunn, established 1965), Leighton Homes Pty Ltd (architect Peter Hooks, established c1965), Lend Lease Homes Pty Ltd (architect Robin Boyd, established 1966), Consolidated Homes Industries (architect Geoffrey Woodfall, established 1967), and Vindin Suares (architect Chancellor & Patrick, established 1968).

Place History

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra was built in 1968-69 by prominent project home building company, Merchant Builders. It was built on land previously occupied by three brick residences at 21-25 Kensington Road (*Sun News-Pictorial,* 21 June 1954:16; *The Age,* 26 July 1969:25; Stonnington Council Building Permit Files). The existing houses, owned by Michael H Searby, Geoffrey H Fell and Henry A Standish respectively, were demolished in 1968 and were replaced with a townhouse development designed by architect, Graeme Gunn, for Merchant Builders (Prahran Valuation Records; Stonnington Council Building Permit Files; Figure 2).

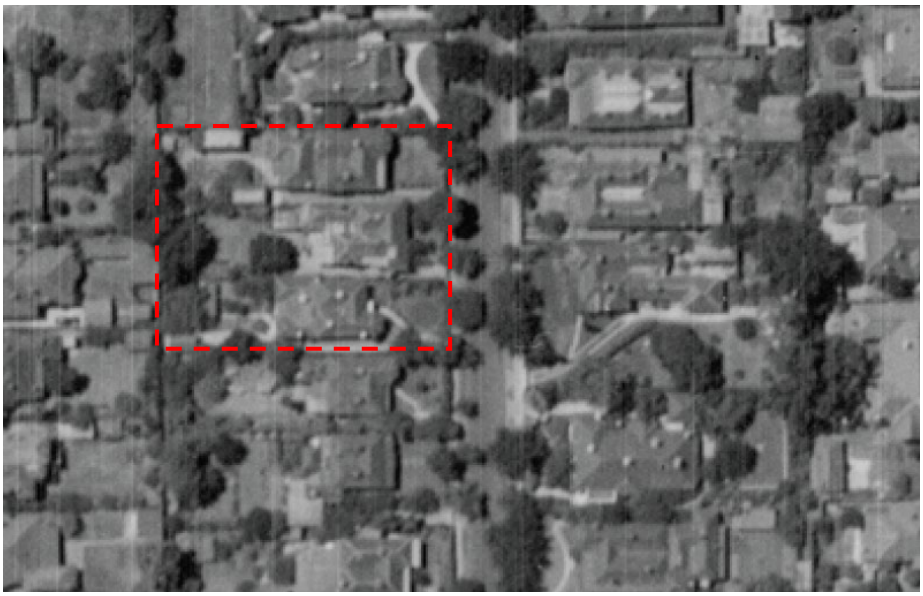


Figure 2. 1951 aerial photograph showing houses demolished for Kensington Close development (Source: Landata Victoria)

Merchant Builders was one of Australia's most influential project house-building companies. Founded in 1965 by David Yencken and John Ridge, the pair established the company to address a perceived gap in the market for quality, economical housing in Australia. Yencken and Ridge, and the firm's consultant architect Graeme Gunn and landscape architect Ellis Stones, were deeply interested in how to increase density in Melbourne's inner and outer suburbs without losing the connection with landscape, and promoted the idea that house, interiors, landscape and site should be harmoniously integrated by top design professionals (MSD 2015:61).

Their townhouse and cluster housing projects promoted this integration of architecture, native planting, shared space, environmental design and interior design. Designed for higher density living, their townhouse developments were 'planned to provide privacy from neighbours, enclosed garden areas…a functional and pleasing design, and overall an exciting architectural grouping' (MSD 2015:61). Kensington Close was one of the company's early townhouse developments, comprising 11 townhouses, ranging from three to four bedrooms (MSD 2015:61; Figures 3-6). The townhouses were constructed of double-brick external walls with ceiling finishes of either concrete or plaster and interior wall finishes of bagged brick or smooth plaster board (*The Age,* 26 July 1969:25). The development coincided with the introduction of the *Strata Titles Act 1967*, which allowed the sale of individual units. As with the majority of Merchant Builders' early designs, the landscape was designed by noted landscape designer, Ellis Stones (*Australian Jewish News,* 18 March 1988:63; *The Age,* 26 July 1969:25). Stones retained trees from the earlier gardens on the site, including a mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra*) and Oak (*Quercus sp.*), as part of the overall landscape design.

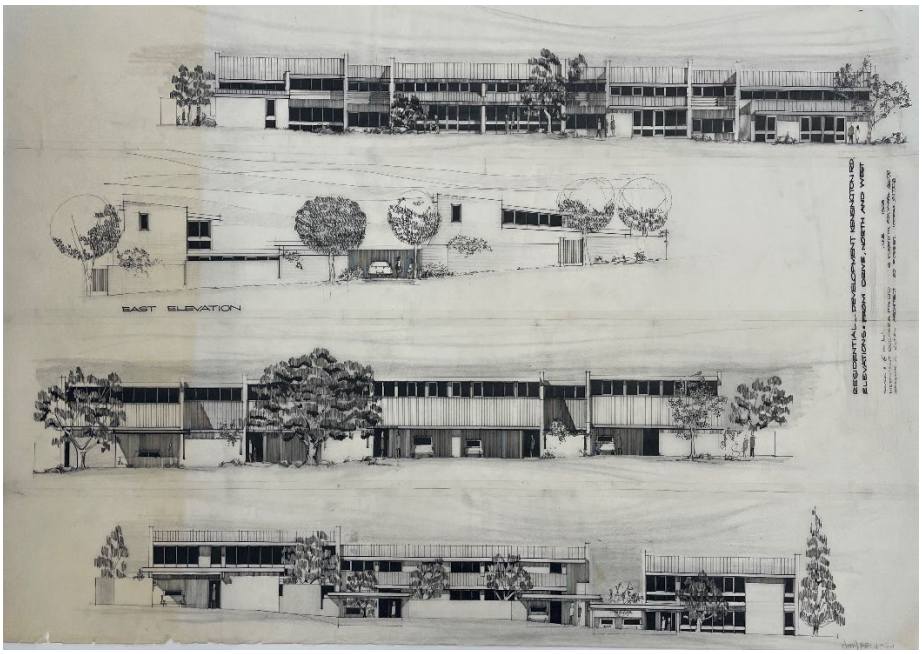


Figure 3. Elevation drawings of the townhouses at Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra, June 1968 (Source: State Library of Victoria).

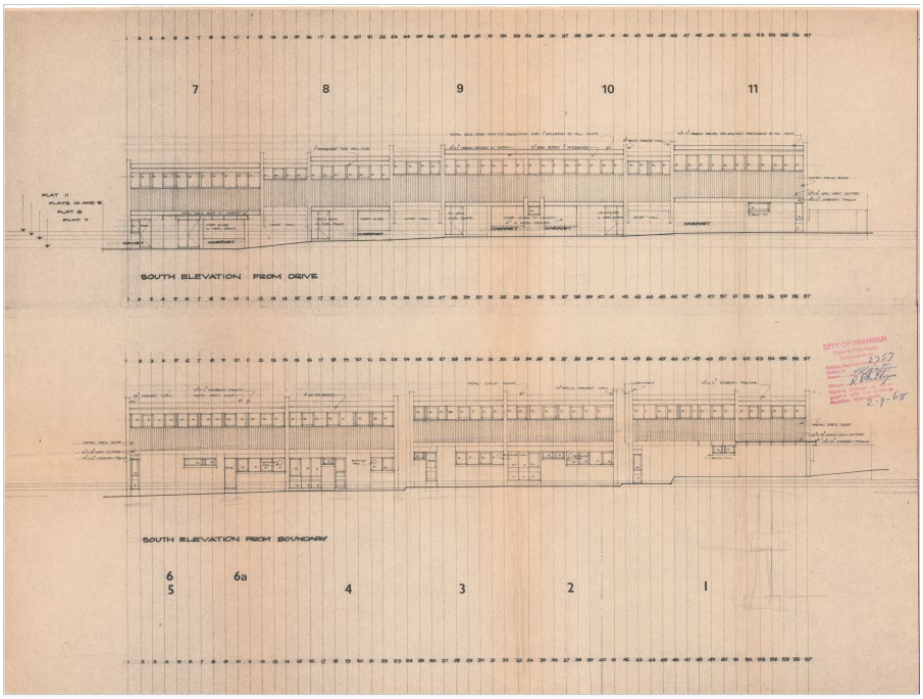


Figure 4. Additional elevation drawings of the townhouses at Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra, June 1968 (Source: Stonnington Council Building Permit Files).

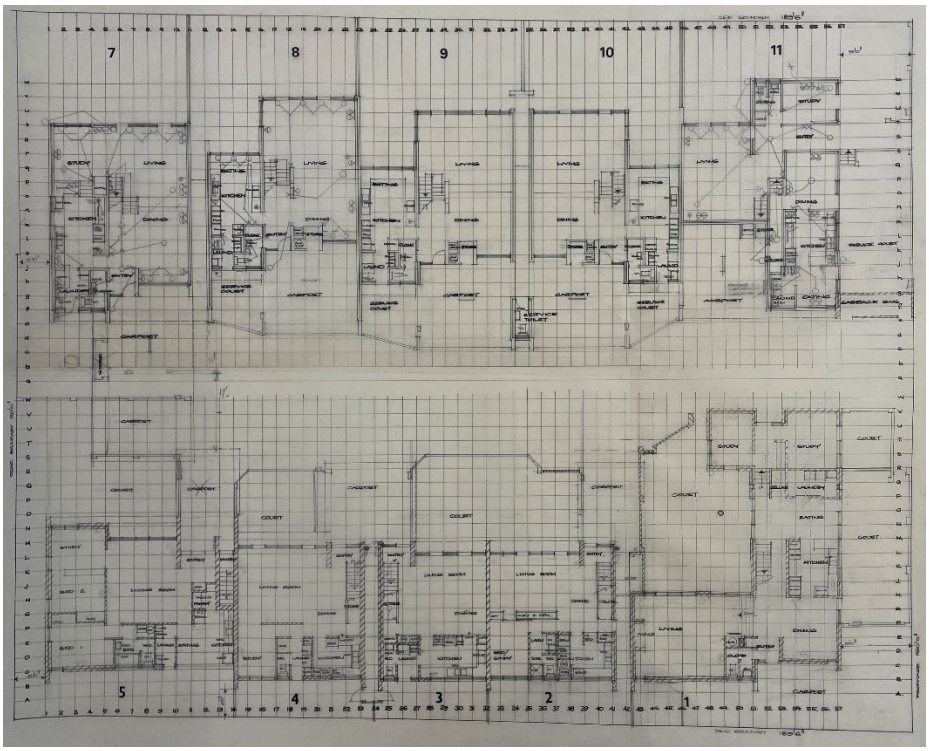


Figure 5. Lower floors site plan showing the townhouses at Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, July 1968 (Source: State Library of Victoria)

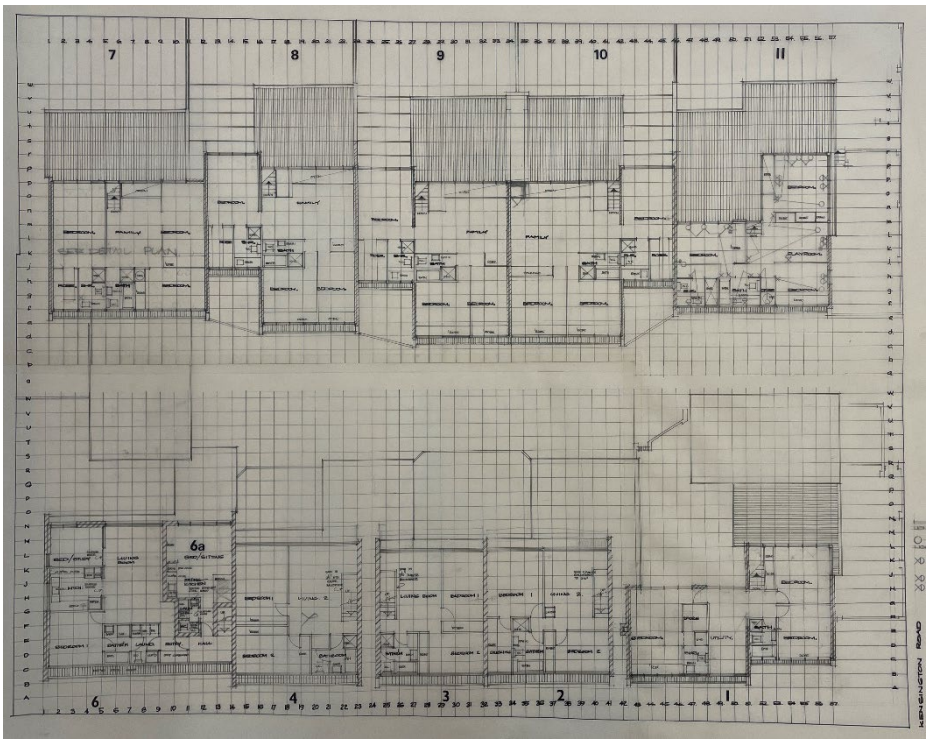


Figure 6. Upper floors site plan showing the townhouses at Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, July 1968 (Source: State Library of Victoria)

An article in *The Age* in July 1969 promoted the townhouse development soon after its construction. The article praised Merchant Builders' approach to confined suburban settings, and their innovative integration of setting, building design and landscape:

> *Merchant Builders Pty Ltd are winning their terrestrial battle against confined space. In several older localities around Melbourne they have demolished old dwellings and replaced them with superior town houses designed by architect Graeme Gunn. These*

houses are paradoxes in brick – they give their owners ample space within the confined space of suburbia.

The latest Merchant Builders development of this type is 'Kensington Close' at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra, where 11 townhouses have just been completed – and five have already been sold…

…The site was formerly occupied by three old houses and their attendant trees. The houses have gone, but many of the trees remain. Merchant Builders have been very thoughtful about it all. They have so arranged their buildings so trees can be accommodated with ease…Mr Ellis Stones has carried out the landscaping with his usual artistry; extensive use of bluestone gives a commendably rugged effect… (The Age, 26 July 1969:25).

Later advertising praised the north-facing courtyard gardens, the 'spacious yet cosy living environment, and the 'private and supremely convenient' location (*Australian Jewish News,* 18 March 1988:63). The townhouses remain in use as individual residences.



Figure 7. Photograph of the new Merchant Builders' Kensington Close townhouse development at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra, 1969 (Source: The Age, 26 July 1969:25)



Figure 8. Photograph of Kensington Close soon after completion, 1970 (Source: State Library of Victoria)

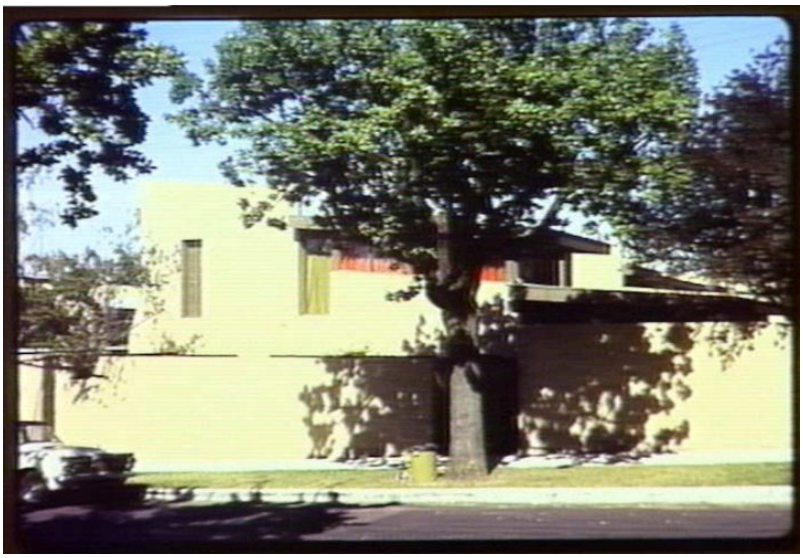


Figure 9. Photograph of Kensington Close soon after completion, 1970 (Source: State Library of Victoria)



Figure 10. Photograph of Kensington Close soon after completion, 1970 (Source: State Library of Victoria)



Figure 11. Aerial photograph showing Kensington Close, 1975, indicated by red rectangle (Source: Landata Victoria)



Figure 12. Illustration of a split-level townhouse at Kensington Close accompanying an auction notice, 1988 (Source: Australian Jewish News, 18 March 1988:63)

Merchant Builders, project house builders

In the 1960s a new range of Australian building companies offered a new concept in residential construction – project houses. These architect-designed houses promised better quality design than the average speculatively built house (Quilford 2016).

Merchant Builders was one of Australia's most influential project house-building companies. Founded in 1965 by David Yencken and John Ridge, many of those within Merchant Builders knew Robin Boyd through professional and social networks and were influenced by his criticisms of suburban housing as discussed in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960). Yencken and Ridge aspired to reform the design of suburban housing. Drawing on their past business experience in motels and the timber and construction industries, they took a comprehensive approach to design, integrating architecture, landscape and interiors (Gartner 2012:451; Quilford 2016).

The firm's designs promoted:

> *… an emerging aesthetic of low-profile buildings in the landscape, the zoning of family living, indoor-outdoor links, passive energy features and a 'natural' palette of colours and tonings and native planting, introduced by landscape designer Ellis Stones (Gartner 2012:451).*

Initially the company was closely associated with architect Graeme Gunn, who was the sole consultant architect until 1969 and continued to work with the company until 1972 (Gartner 2012:451).

Merchant Builders' houses were marketed across south-eastern Australia. The company set new benchmarks for residential architecture in the country, encouraging inclusion of landscape, indigenous planting, site planning and interiors as a total package, which resulted in various architectural, environmental and design awards (Quilford 2016; Gartner 2012:451).

Yencken left Merchant Builders in 1982 and after 1987 Merchant Builders was sold to a series of companies before AV Jennings acquired the company's intellectual property in 1991 (Gartner 2012:451; O'Callaghan & Pickett 2012:144).

Graeme Gunn, architect

Graeme Gunn (1933-2024) studied architecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (1956-1960) and began his career in the office of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd (1960-1962). He established his own practice in 1963, becoming a leading design architect in Australia and a highly influential figure in housing, commercial architecture and planning in Victoria (Trimble 2012:303-4).

In 1965, Gunn became consultant architect to Merchant Builders, working closely with founders David Yencken and John Ridge to develop a range of affordable well-designed houses that responded to site and landscape. Gunn's medium density designs for townhouses and project housing integrated built form with landscape, a strategy developed through close collaboration with landscape designer, Ellis Stones

(MSD 2015:21). Examples of his residential work include Yuille Street, Brighton (1967), 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (1967), Molesworth Street, Kew (1968), and Winter Park, Doncaster (1970-74).

While working for Merchant Builders, Gunn, along with Yencken, was influential in advocating for the *Cluster Title Act 1974* and *Model Cluster Code 1975*. Gunn left Merchant Builders in the early 1970s, becoming Head of the School of Architecture and Building at RMIT from 1972 to 1982 and also undertook a range of commercial work, including the Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union office, Carlton (1968-69), Royal South Yarra Lawn Tennis Club (1969), Torquay Surf Lifesaving Clubhouse (1970) and the Prahran Market refurbishment (1977-82).

Description

Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is a townhouse development which is located on the west side of Kensington Road, north-west of the main intersection of Toorak Road and Williams Road. The large rectangular site is accessed by a central driveway which runs the length of the site, with rows of townhouses to the north and south. An additional driveway at the southern end of the street boundary provides vehicular access to a single carport. High brick garden walls line the street boundary and return either side of the bluestone pitcher-paved central driveway.

The townhouses are constructed of pale brickwork with high brick parapets extending to form wing walls between the individual residences. Low-pitched metal deck-clad roofs extend beyond the wing walls to form broad eaves with stained timber fascias that protect bands of windows to the upper floors. Below the windows, prominent sections of raked wall – clad with beige-coloured profiled metal decking – span between raked wing walls and individual carports are recessed under the upper floors. At ground level the townhouses are provided with north-facing courtyards, enclosed with high brick walls and horizontal timber fencing.

A mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra*) tree is centrally located within the site. A mature Oak (*Quercus sp.*) is located at the rear, north-west of the site (south-west of Unit 7).

Key Features:

- Group of two-storey townhouses designed in a post-war Modernist style
- Townhouses arranged in rows north and south of a central bluestone pitcher-paved driveway
- Simple geometric compositions with low-pitched, metal tray deck-clad roof forms and deep eaves with broad fascias
- Pale brick construction with stained timberwork and beige-coloured steel tray deck wall cladding
- High brick parapet walls, wing walls and garden walls providing privacy
- Expansive glazing including bands of windows below the eaves and at ground level
- Prominent sections of raked wall below the windows, clad with metal decking, between raked wing walls
- Integrated carports recessed under upper levels
- Integrated landscaped setting including north-facing courtyards
- Mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra*) and oak (*Quercus sp.*) trees dating from earlier residences on the site
- High brick garden walls to the street boundary and courtyards with sections of horizontal timber fencing to courtyards.



Figure 13. Aerial photograph of Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra (Source: Nearmap, dated 9 October 2024)



Figure 14. Driveway entrance to Kensington Close from Kensington Road (Source: GJM Heritage, November 2024)



Figure 15. View of townhouses looking north-west from Kensington Road (Source: GJM Heritage, June 2024)



Figure 16. Street (east) elevation of townhouse 1 (Source GJM Heritage, November 2024)



Figure 17. Looking west along the shared driveway towards the townhouses (Source: GJM Heritage, November 2024)



Figure 18. Looking west towards townhouses from within Kensington Close (Source: GJM Heritage, June 2024)



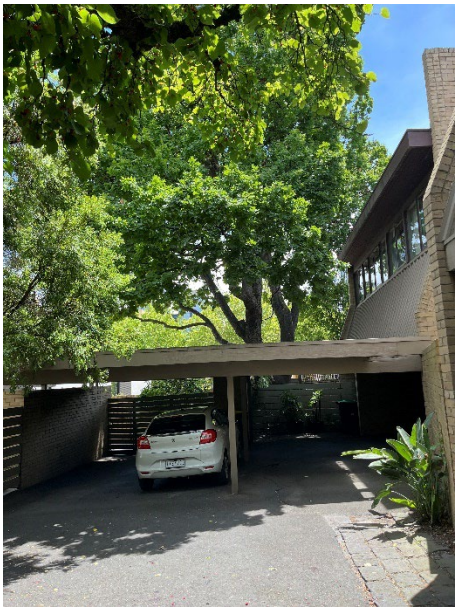


Figure 19. (left) Mature mulberry tree (Morus nigra) – indicated (Source: GJM Heritage, December 2024)

Figure 20. (right) Mature oak tree (Quercus sp.) (Source: GJM Heritage, December 2024)

Intactness and Integrity

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra retains a very high degree of integrity in fabric, form and detail. The townhouses remain highly intact externally and retain the ability to be understood and appreciated as an example of a 1960s project home townhouse development.

Comparative Analysis

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is a highly intact example of a 1960s Modernist townhouse development. Designed by architect, Graeme Gunn, for influential building company, Merchant Builders, it is one of a number of townhouse developments that were designed and constructed across Victoria in the post-war period.

Merchant Builders pioneered the introduction of energy efficient, environmentally friendly, architect-designed project homes in Victoria in the 1960s and 1970s. The company's designs were based on strong design principles that included an integrated relationship between house and site, interconnectivity between indoor and outdoor spaces, and a simplicity in form and detailing. Merchant Builders were particularly invested in increasing density in Melbourne's inner and outer suburbs without losing the connection with landscape, and promoted the idea that house, interiors, landscape and site should be harmoniously integrated (MSD 2015:61). Their townhouse projects included developments at Yuille Street, Brighton (1967); 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (1967), Molesworth Street, Kew (1968); 93 Grange Road, Toorak (1968), and the subject property at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra (1968-69) (MSD 2015:9). Within Stonnington, only 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern is included in the Heritage Overlay (currently on an interim basis):

17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (Interim HO666)



Figure 21. 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (Source: GJM Heritage, City of Stonnington Malvern Heritage Review, 2020)

Like Kensington Close, the townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern were designed by architect, Graeme Gunn, for Merchant Builders with landscape by Ellis Stones and are an early example of the townhouse typology designed by Merchant Builders within the City of Stonnington. They are characterised by a careful consideration of siting, orientation and the use of natural materials such as exposed brick and stained timber.

Like 17 Sorrett Avenue, Kensington Close is a sophisticated and well-resolved design that exhibits the key design principles promoted by Merchant Builders and retains a high degree of integrity to its period of construction. It is important as a highly intact example of a 1960s townhouse development.

Assessment Against Criteria

Criteria referred to in *Planning Practice Note No. 1: Applying the Heritage Overlay* (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, August 2018), modified for the local context.

CRITERION A: *Importance to the course or pattern of the City of Stonnington's cultural or natural history (historical significance).*

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra has a clear association with the project homes industry in Victoria and higher-density development in the post-war period in the City of Stonnington. Constructed by highly influential project home building company Merchant Builders in 1968-69, Kensington Close is an early example of townhouse developments which became widespread across Melbourne in the late 1960s and 1970s following changes to the *Strata Titles Act 1967.* The townhouses demonstrate the shift towards more affordable and higher density living, which characterised suburban development throughout the City of Stonnington, and Melbourne more broadly, in the late-twentieth century.

CRITERION B: *Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the City of Stonnington's cultural or natural history (rarity).*

N/A

CRITERION C: *Possession to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the City of Stonnington's cultural or natural history (research potential).*

N/A

CRITERION D: *Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of class of cultural or natural places or environments (representativeness).*

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is a fine and highly intact example of a Modernist townhouse development constructed during the post-war period. The complex displays the key characteristics of a Modernist style townhouse development from this period including rows of attached two-storey residences accessed via a communal thoroughfare, simple, geometric plan forms, low-pitched metal-clad roofs with deep eaves with broad fascias, expansive glazing including bands of highlight windows, integrated and recessed carports, wing walls and high garden walls enclosing north-facing courtyards to provide privacy and a restrained material palette of pale brick, timber and steel tray deck-cladding.

CRITERION E: *Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics (aesthetic significance).*

Kensington Close at 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra is of aesthetic significance as a sophisticated and well-executed example of Modernist style townhouse development of the 1960s. Designed for Merchant Builders by renowned architect Graeme Gunn, the townhouses are characterised by their repetitive use of bold angled forms with raked walls and wing walls, their neutral colour palette of pale brickwork, beige steel tray deck-cladding, stained timberwork and bluestone pitcher-paving, and their integrated landscaped setting designed by renowned landscape designer Ellis Stones, including private north-facing courtyards and a mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra)* and Oak (*Quercus sp.*) tree from earlier gardens on the site. Kensington Close demonstrates the key aesthetic qualities of Modernist design in the City of Stonnington to a very high standard.

CRITERION F: *Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.*

N/A

CRITERION G: *Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of their continuing cultural traditions (social significance).*

N/A

CRITERION H: *Special association with the life or works of a period, or group of persons, of importance in the City of Stonnington's history (associative significance).*

N/A

Grading and Recommendations

It is recommended that the place be included in the Heritage Overlay of the Stonnington Planning Scheme as a locally significant heritage place (HO802).

Recommendations for the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (Clause 43.01) to the Stonnington Planning Scheme:

External paint controls *Is a permit required to paint an already painted surface?*	Yes – raked profiled metal cladding to facades
Internal alteration controls *Is a permit required for internal alterations?*	No
Tree controls *Is a permit required to remove a tree?*	Yes – mature Mulberry (*Morus nigra)* within communal drive and Oak (*Quercus sp.*) tree south-west of Unit 7
Solar energy system controls *Solar energy system controls apply?*	Yes
Outbuildings and fences exemptions *Are there outbuildings or fences which are not exempt from notice and review?*	Yes - High brick garden walls to the street boundary and courtyards with sections of horizontal timber fencing to courtyards.
Victorian Heritage Register *Is this place included on the Victorian Heritage Register?*	No
Prohibited uses may be permitted *Can a permit be granted to use for a use which would otherwise be prohibited?*	No
Aboriginal heritage place *Is the place an Aboriginal heritage place which is subject to the requirements of the* Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006?	No
Incorporated Plan *Does an incorporated plan apply to the site?*	No

Extent of Overlay

To the extent of the property boundary as shown in Figure 22 below.



Figure 22. Recommended Heritage Overlay

References

Australian Jewish News.

Built Heritage, *Stonnington Thematic Environmental History: Post-war Addendum (Draft),* December 2024.

City of Prahran Central Records, Strata Subdivision File, Stonnington Council Building Files.

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Nearmap.

O'Callaghan J and C Pickett, *Designer Suburbs, Architects and affordable homes in Australia*, Sydney, 2012

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Prahran Valuation Records.

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The Age.

Trimble, J, 'Graeme Gunn' in Philip Goad & Julie Willis's (Eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Port Melbourne, 2012.