

THREE 'USONIAN' HOME UNITS

Address	38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick
Significance	Local
Construction Date	1966
Period	Post-WWII
Date Inspected	Late 2018



Statement of Significance

What is Significant?

The Three 'Usonian' Home Units at 38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick, are significant, namely its exterior of unpainted contrasting textured and smooth brick, tile clad hip roof sections with broad eaves and box gutters, and cantilevered carports. The original window configurations are also significant including the lattice transoms to the east, creating a relatively blank expression to the street, and a series of full height windows to the courtyard.

How is it Significant?

The Three 'Usonian' Home Units at 38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick, are of historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Glen Eira.

Why is it Significant?

The Three 'Usonian' Home Units at 38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick, designed by the noted architect David Godsell, are of historical significance as a distinctive and accomplished Modernist example of a development type that, while common to the suburb from the post-WWII period, did not routinely express such a marked level of design. Constructed in 1966, the units replaced a freestanding Interwar period house and were indicative of popular interest at the time with a typology new to suburban areas, the home unit.

(Criterion A)

The Three 'Usonian' Home Units at 38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick, are of aesthetic significance as a highly intact and considered post-WWII Modernist residential development. Central to the design is the L-shaped form and interlocking composition of the three brick units, low scale, alternating hipped and flat roofs, arrangement of indoor and outdoor spaces, cantilevered/integrated carports and internal courtyards. These aspects, along with the restrained but contrasting material palette and complementary landscaping elements, demonstrate Godsell's application of Usonian principles in combination with the influence of Japanese architecture, especially with the transom lights (*ramma*) and deep beams to the cantilevered carport canopies. (Criterion E)

Description

The home units are situated on a flat and elongated rectangular site (approximately 957m²) with a moderate setback from Prahran Grove. Each of the three interlocking units has an L-shaped plan and consists of a main living wing with a hipped roof, clad in concrete tiles, and a rear bedroom wing with a flat roof clad in metal sheeting. This latter section of the roof extends eastward to form a cantilevered carport. Other key roof elements include deep soffits/eaves overhang with a wide painted timber fascias, which conceals the box gutters.

From an aerial perspective, the alternating use of pyramidal and flat roofs has a bold and graphic-like quality – indicative of the Modernist idiom.¹ An unobstructed view of the low, cantilevering carports is maintained from the street. The carport roof has a Japanese aesthetic, and features deep exposed beams and wide fascias. The flat roof extends immediately below the soffit of the wide eaves of the hipped roof, demonstrating the subtle interplay of shifting, horizontal roof planes. The front unit is set back approximately eight metres from the front boundary to accommodate a grassed front yard that also remains open to the street. Several medium sized trees partly obscure the north-east corner of the building. The single storey units are timber framed clad in concrete brick (stretcher bond).



Photograph of the units from Prahran Grove, late 1960s
(Source: Peter Wille, SLV, H91.244/2047)



Cantilevered carports
Driveway has been modified and the garage is a later addition

The facades are a combination of light brown brick with a rough texture and smoother, cream/lighter coloured brick. Subtle brick detailing and fenestration reinforces the shared and private spaces on the site, a concept that was central to Godsell's work. In each of the unit's living area wings, the east elevation features a narrow lattice screen/window, located high in the wall like a transom light. This window format is typical of much traditional Japanese design, in which it is known as a *ramma*. Being positioned above the otherwise blank lower section, it serves to emphasise the clear demarcation of public and private domains.

A single horizontal band of projecting cream bricks extends across the upper section of the north elevation in line with lower level of the transom screen, creating another subtle interplay, this time of negative and positive. A similar brick detail is employed in the vertical to indicate the location of the recessed entrances.

¹ Modernism was inspired by the declarations of the *Congrès internationaux d'architecture moderne* (international congress of modern architecture, CIAM), an organisation of prominent architects – dominated by Le Corbusier – active in Europe between 1928-56. Adopted internationally (hence, often referred to as the International Style in Australia), it was originally characterised by the rejection of historical associations, employment of planar forms and embracement of non-traditional materials. Several strands evolved. By the late 20th century, it could also refer to design that referenced historic examples of modernism.

The west elevation features narrow vertical strips of alternating full height glazing and light-coloured/cream brick walls. This contrasts with the north and east elevations which are primarily brown brick and distinguishes the private and public areas. Glazing on the south and west facing walls of each courtyard provide the bedrooms and living areas with natural daylight. The light is regulated by the wide eaves of the roof and sunshades fixed above the windows.

The south facing walls of the units enclose the rear courtyards and lack windows for privacy.



Photograph of the units from Prahran Grove, late 1960s
(Source: Peter Wille, SLV, H91.244/2047)



North-east corner, contemporary
Note cream brick detailing and lattice screen

Godsell was influenced by the eminent American architect, Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959). In particular, his philosophy of the 'Usonian' house. This term – coined by Wright – referred to the design of a small and single-family house designed to integrate with the local landscape and climate. Wright, along with other progressive architects in the late 1930s, had developed an increased interest in Japanese architecture and design principles such as a strong connection to the outdoors through the use of gardens, courtyards and natural lighting, informed the principles of the Usonian home.



Photograph of the units (west façade) from Prahran Grove, late 1960s
(Source: Peter Wille, SLV, H91.244/2047))



North-west corner, contemporary

Typically, houses designed on Usonian principles are compact and L-shaped buildings with defined public and private spaces that display a unified and interrelated composition and a connection with the surrounding environment. The buildings are characterised by flat roofs, clerestory windows, carports, an honest expression of materials and cantilevered overhangs.² These elements are all evident at the subject site such that three units can be readily defined as being 'Usonian'.

² Fiona Austin, Alison Alexander and Simon Reeves, *Beaumaris Modern*, Melbourne Books, 2018, p21

An original timber fence along the west half of the front boundary defines the common, shared spaces on the east half of the site and the private spaces on the west half of the site. The fence returns to meet the north façade of the front unit, forming a courtyard for the front residence. The abutting rear units are strategically configured to form an enclosed, north-west courtyard for each of the units.

The original configuration of soft, permeable landscaping to the north-east corner of the front unit and the east facing recessed entrances of the three units, has for the most part been retained. The original configuration of the driveway and central grass strip has been slightly modified. Timber mailboxes and brick plinth to the front of the site are likely original. A detached timber garage in the south-east corner is a later addition.

History

The subject place formed part of Crown allotment 249 of the Parish of Prahran, its roughly 8 acres granted to W B Belcher.³ This area was located immediately south of Glen Eira Road – one of the earliest established thoroughfares in the district, increasingly referred to as ‘Elsternwick’ from the 1850s⁴ – on land that was described in early surveys as ‘heath’.⁵

While initially situated on the periphery of suburban Melbourne, beyond the more settled environs of Prahran and St Kilda, the ready availability of considerable allotments in Elsternwick and the early private establishment of its railway station (1859) proved attractive to the genteel and affluent. Alongside dairies and market gardens, a patchwork of prestige estates, ‘private houses of a superior character standing in pleasure grounds’,⁶ were erected from the 1860s. The government takeover of the railway line (1878), which improved services, and speculative activities of the land boom stimulated a more intensive phase of subdivision and development in the suburb over the 1880s. Along the major roads and across the former grounds of handsome mansions, rows of generally high-quality detached houses multiplied and dedicated shopping strips emerged. Following the general building hiatus of the 1890s Depression, a decidedly middle-class suburb consolidated with little unused land available by the early 1930s.⁷ While infill and redevelopment was relatively limited in post-WWII period Elsternwick, where it did occur it often reflected the contemporary modernist aesthetic, which is a noteworthy subtheme in the development of the municipality.

In 1883, Alfred Fowler acquired a relatively small lot just over an acre on the southern side of Prahran Grove, near Eastaway Street that included the subject place.⁸ In 1892, Emma Hubbard acquired this holding, which was progressively subdivided into smaller lots.⁹ Residential development along Prahran Grove was initially slow, with a preponderance of market gardens, dairies and industrial usages, including that of a chemical factory immediately west of the subject place, remaining active into the early 20th century.

The subject lot was largely demarcated in 1911 however, it was not developed until circa 1926 when a 5-roomed weatherboard house was erected.¹⁰ This building was occupied by a series of owners before its purchase in 1948 by husband and wife, John Watson and Jessie Evelyn Kohry.¹¹

In the early 1960s, the Kohrys commissioned architect David Godsell to design three home units in place of the Interwar period residence at the subject place. David and the Godsell family had a pre-existing link with Prahran Grove, having been residents of the street (at no. 40) across the 1950s.¹² His tendency to receive work via personal connections has also been documented.¹³ A drawing from Godsell’s submitted design for the home units is reproduced below.

³ *Part of the Parish of Prahran*, Department of Crown Lands and Survey, 1857, SLV, <<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/123955>>.

⁴ The designation of ‘Elsternwick’ likely derives from the combination of either a local creek (now Elwood Canal) and/or the name of an early cottage – *Elster* (the German word for magpie) – with the Old English word for village, *Wick*; a reference to the survey of a township in 1856 near the corner of Glen Huntly Road and the Nepean Highway. (Jill Barnard, ‘Elsternwick’, *eMelbourne*, School of Historical & Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, July 2008, accessed <<http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM00436b.htm>>, accessed 17 June 2019)

⁵ *Plan of portions marked in the Parish of Prahran*, Melbourne, Surveyor General Office, 1853, SLV

⁶ Andrew Garran, *Picturesque atlas of Australasia*, Sydney, Picturesque Atlas Publishing Company, 1888, p148

⁷ Peter Murray and John C Wells, *From sand, swamp and health: a history of Caulfield*, Blackburn, J & D Burrows for City of Caulfield, 1980, p110

⁸ Certificate of Title, vol. 1250, folio 898

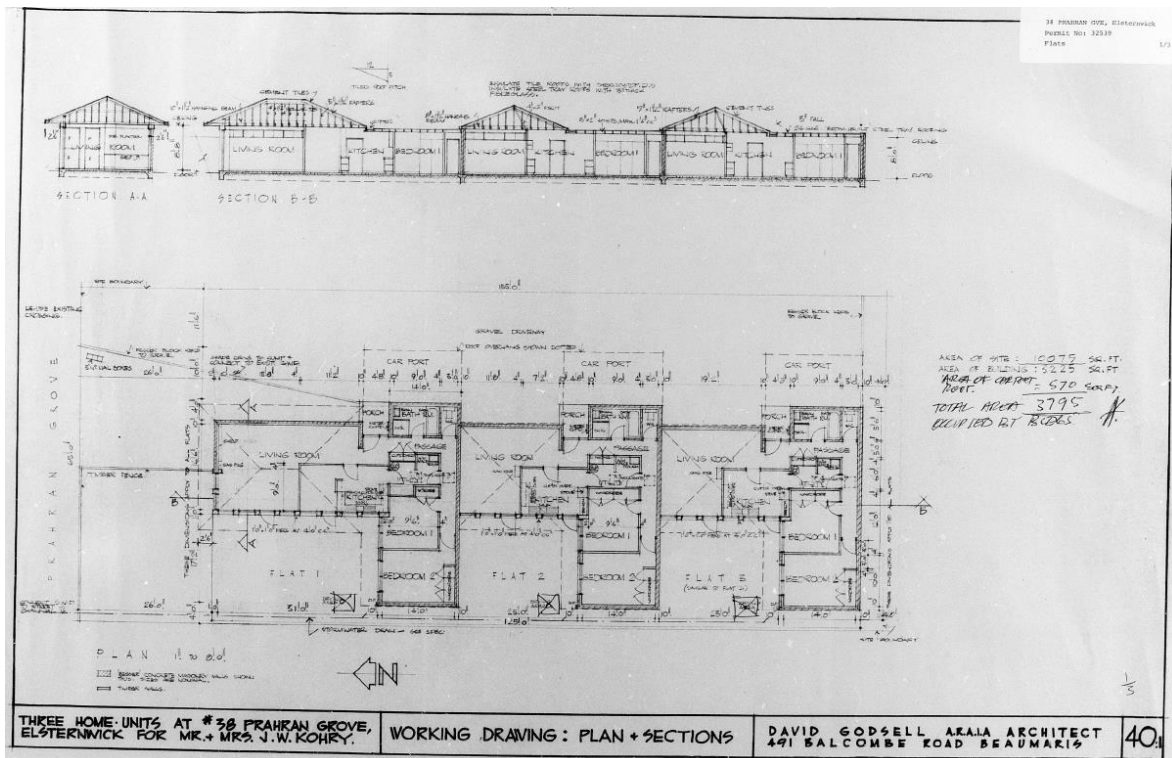
⁹ Certificate of Title, vol. 12424, folio 715

¹⁰ Certificate of Title, vol. 3548, folio 522; and Caulfield rate book, 1926 –NB in 1934, a small southern section of the lot was excised to create the existing dimensions of the subject place (Certificate of Title, volume 5952, folio 249)

¹¹ Certificate of Title, vol. 5952, folio 249; and review of *Sands and MacDougall’s Directory* editions, 1955-60

¹² *Sands and MacDougall’s Directory*, 1950

Born in England, David Brymer Godsell (1930-86) immigrated to Australia in 1943 alongside his family. He received his architectural education through part-time study in engineering at the Melbourne Technical College and via the Atelier course at the University of Melbourne.¹⁴ As a student, Godsell worked for architect Marcus Martin, and between 1953-60, Guilford Bell, before setting up in private practice. Like many of his colleagues at work in the 1950s and 1960s, he was influenced by the Wrightian approach to design ('organic architecture') as well as traditional Japanese architecture. Godsell's design output – predominantly that of domestic work – is well-regarded by the contemporary architectural profession. Of note is his personal residence at 491 Balcombe Road, Beaumaris (VHR, H2379), constructed in 1960, and post offices at Mordialloc (1970) and Bentleigh (1972).¹⁵



Submitted drawings for three home units at the subject place – early to mid-1960s
 (Source: Glen Eira Building Files, permit no. 32539)

Godsell's design occurred within a broad and increasingly recognised stream of progressive architecture in operation across the municipality during the post-WWII period. While predominantly associated with Melbourne's eastern suburbs, Modernism also formed a key thread in the development of the City of Glen Eira, particularly Elsternwick and Caulfield proper, between the 1950s and 1970s. As architectural historian Phillip Goad makes clear, the district was not just a 'safe haven for the speculative house builder'. Crucial to the introduction of non-traditional design into the area was the influx of Jewish residents from the Interwar period, many of whom were immigrants and familiar with European examples of Modernism. This provided commissions for émigré architects (many of whom were themselves Jewish) as well as progressive Australian-born designers and practices. Professional and societal interests in new forms and Modernism, as well as an exploration of the small houses (underset by the

¹³ 'David Godsell House', VHD; and Built Heritage, *Survey of Post WW2 Heritage: Stage 2, Part 2*, 2010, p52
¹⁴ While not completing his University degree, Godsell undertook and passed the Architects Registration Board's exam. (Heritage Victoria, 'Recommendation of the Executive Director and Assessment of Cultural Heritage Significance, David Godsell House, 2017, p14)
¹⁵ Philippa McMahon, 'Godsell, David', in Philip Goad and Julie Willis, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp.279-80

longstanding fascination with the design of the 'ideal home'), underscored the emergence of a distinctive layer of architecture in the municipality, ranging from freestanding houses to walk-up flats, units and townhouses.¹⁶

This development was likely constructed in early 1966, as by May that year separate titles had been issued for each of the three units.¹⁷ The sales advertisement follows:

2 Architect-Designed Villa Home Units. (In group of 3). 38 Prahran Grove. Each unit has private courtyard facing west, designed for maximum privacy. Cont. ent. Hall, L-shaped lounge, diningroom, 2 bedrooms, modern kitchen, fully tiled bathroom and shower recess, separate int. toilet. Carport. Fitts. incl. parquetry flooring throughout... Internal inspection of these delightful units recommended. Price \$14,300 (£7150).¹⁸

The Kohrys moved into the front unit, while the middle and rear unit were sold.¹⁹

In the wake of its completion, the units were recorded by draughtsman and amateur photographer, Peter Wille. These photographs have been utilised throughout the citation.

Thematic Context/Comparative Analysis

City of Glen Eira Heritage Management Plan – vol. 1 (Historical Background):

- Epilogue (1940s onwards)

Known comparable places in the City of Glen Eira

Only two other Modernist houses have individual overlays however a project is underway to review the heritage value of other houses built after WWII across the municipality. Two others sites in the vicinity are also recommended for a heritage overlay, both of which reflect different contemporary design idioms.

- *Lind House*, 450 Dandenong Road, Caulfield North (HO155/VHR 2387) – built approximately 15 years earlier than the subject place (1954-55), the two storey dwelling has an undercroft part supported on piloti with a butterfly roof that extends forward with a wide soffit. Externally it is clad in cream brick with sections of random stone cladding, vertical timber battens and navy spandrel glass panes.
- *Ernest Fooks House*, 32 Howitt Road, Caulfield North (HO150/VHR 2191) – erected five years or so earlier than the subject place, being designed in 1964 and completed in 1966. The single storey house has a blank presentation to the street with a car port to the front. The walls are of tan brick and the roof is flat with a clerestory section.
- Elevated Townhouses at 23 Seymour Road, Elsternwick (recommended for a HO) – Designed in 1973 by Harold D Schaffer, the building consists of eight conjoined residences. More Brutalist in style, its dramatic design, which includes a varying series of narrow, projecting hood windows, is widely visible from the street.

Condition

Good

Integrity

Intact

Previous Assessment

N grade (not significant) – Andrew Ward, *City of Caulfield Urban Conservation Study*, field survey sheet 13, 1996

¹⁶ Goad comments, 'Such domestic architecture, gleaming, 'maintenance-free', and decidedly non-referential in its language and forms, must have at the time, seemed almost alien in the otherwise conventional suburban setting'. (*Notable and Modern: Postwar Domestic Architecture in the City of Glen Eira*, np)

¹⁷ Certificate of Title, vol. 8628, folio 037

¹⁸ 'Advertising', *Age*, 14 May 1966, p50

¹⁹ Certificate of Title, vol. 8638, folio 943; and Certificate of Title, volume 8638, folio 944

Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls

External Paint Controls	No
Internal Alteration Controls	No
Tree Controls	No
Outbuildings and/or Fences	No

Extent of Heritage Overlay

The proposed extent of the heritage overlay would be the parcel of land associated with 38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick.



Recommended extent of heritage overlay
(Source: Nearmap, depicting February 2019)