

ELEVATED TOWNHOUSES

Address	23 Seymour Road, Elsternwick
Significance	Local
Construction Dates	1973
Period	Post-WWII
Date Inspected	Early 2019



Statement of Significance

What is Significant?

The Elevated Townhouses at 23 Seymour Road, Elsternwick, is significant, including the external expression and undercroft carpark, cement block retaining wall to the east, grassed mound and concrete retaining wall at the front of the property.

How is it Significant?

The Elevated Townhouses at 23 Seymour Road, Elsternwick, are of historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Glen Eira.

Why is it Significant?

The Elevated Townhouses at 23 Seymour Road, Elsternwick, constructed in 1973, to the design of Harold David Shafer, are of historical significance as an unusual example of Brutalist residential development in the municipality. The townhouse, although widespread across the region by late 20th century and illustrative of an alternative form of suburban living, was often subject to criticism for its repetitiveness and lack of design flair. In comparison, the Elevated Townhouses demonstrates a high end, architect composed example of the typology in the municipality. (Criterion A)

The Elevated Townhouses are of aesthetic significance as a highly intact and accomplished example of Brutalism. Importantly, it is also a relatively rare demonstration of this idiom at the scale of a private domestic development, where the style was

conventionally not employed due to its perceived 'toughness'. From the public domain, the form of the townhouses manifests as both bold and dramatic, its design underscored by a varying series of projecting window hoods (oft referred to as organ pipes) and heavy splayed piers that elevate the building above the ground. Unusually for a Brutalist design, its walls were also painted; likely in recognition of its need to harmonise with the surrounding residential context. Similarly, the lack of a fence and artificial mound to the front of the site are integral and original elements, positioned carefully so as to soften the appearance of the building. (Criterion E)

Description

The two-storey Brutalist townhouse block with basement/undercroft carpark is located on a large, rectangular site in a residential area. The subject building is set back approximately 7.5 metres from the road and has a large rectangular footprint that encompasses the majority of the site. The following assessment is informed by the original drawings held by Council.¹

In front of the building there is a gently sloping grassed area retained by a low concrete wall. The grassed area partly conceals the undercroft as well as the lower part of the street façade and softens the bold, angular forms of the townhouses. A concrete block wall on the east boundary and half of the north boundary, runs adjacent to a shared driveway, which slopes gently towards basement level. The rear (north) end of the site has been modified and consists of a small detached building with a pitched roof and concrete stair. A narrow path is located along the west boundary of the site.

The large two-storey masonry (brick and concrete) building is predominantly rectangular in form and consists of a carpark at basement level and eight units (four at ground floor and four at first floor). The units are positioned in an east-west orientation with living spaces allocated to the west side of the building and bedrooms to the east side of the building.

Externally, the east side of the building steps up and cantilevers past the carpark below. The angled splayed supports are painted white with a bagged finish while the walls of the upper floors on the east and south elevations have been painted black, emphasising their mass. The splayed supports, and additional vertical fins, are expressed on the east elevation and continue at regular intervals along the length of the building. Rectangular single-paned windows of varying sizes are uniformly positioned within the recessed bays. Some car parking bays to the basement level have metal roller doors.



South facade



East elevation

Cantilevering weather hoods on the street façade are a striking feature of the building. The strong angular forms are confidently composed and have sculptural-like quality to them. The window hoods extend above the facade and angle downwards towards the main roof. The substantial height and depth of the window hoods accentuates their mass, characteristic of the Brutalist style. Each hood frames a narrow 'sliding openable window' that spans the full height of the building. The weather hoods are individually angled and of varying depths, creating the illusion of a gently, curving façade. The projections filter daylight into the street facing unit with the aid of louvred screens within the building. The east half of the façade employs a contrasting black and white colour palette with a bagged, paint finish, achieving a graphic-like quality. Window joinery with a black finish provides further contrast.

¹ 'Drawings', Harold D Shafer, City of Glen Eira, building records, permit no. 41512, dated 1971

The weather hoods on the west side of the façade step down/are at the mound. The main wall has been painted white in this instance, although architectural drawings show that a black wall, similar to the east half of the façade, was considered.



South façade – window hoods

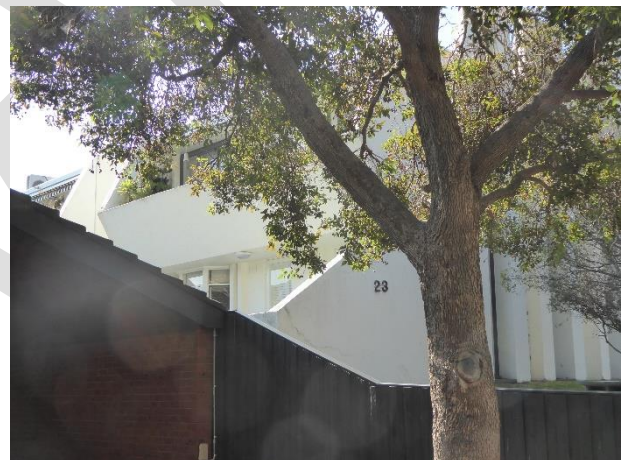


South façade - window hoods

The angled profile of the balconies contrast with the strong vertical elements on the south and east elevations. The west elevation is symmetrical and composed of three bays, separated by two narrow, recessed sections. Balconies run the length of the building at ground and first floor, which have been painted white. The brick balconies have a heavy, block-like quality and consist of solid wall divisions and balconies or 'brick garden walls.' Access to each balcony is by a single timber door flanked by a rectangular awning window and a projecting bay window.



South façade – window hoods



Window hoods

The north elevation is relatively plain and consists of four horizontal, rectangular windows. The exterior has been mainly painted white, except for part of the façade in keeping with the architectural drawings show that a black colour palette was intended for the east half of the façade as well as the narrow clerestory wall above the balconies on the west elevation.

The Post-war phase of the famous Modernist architect Le Corbusier was a catalyst for the late-20th century Brutalist style that appeared in Australia from the mid-1960s.² The term 'New Brutalism' was first employed in 1953 by the English architects Alison and Peter Smithson and came to relate to brut (raw) structures and materials.³

² 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.

Elements of the subject building that are characteristic of the style include rough concrete finishes, and the various boldly defined elements such as heavy splayed columns that elevate the building above the ground and large curvilinear/ambiguous forms.

Similar residential buildings with non-referential forms were being constructed in the Glen Eira area during the late 1950s and 1960s.⁴ The designs of émigré architects such as Ernest Fooks, challenged the conventional forms of residential housing typically seen in the area at that time. For the most part however, such forms had been reserved for public and institutional projects. Rarely being seen at the level of a private residential development.

The striking character of Schafer's angled street facing window hoods were described at the time as recalling the form of 'a cathedral organ',⁵ as well as creating the illusion of curved forms. The painted wall surfaces in a contrasting colour palette in the subject building suggest a more playful approach to the stark and exposed surfaces typically associated with Brutalism.

It is likely that the grassed mound to the front of the site has been integrated to visually soften the bold window hoods, which may have been perceived as too intimidating in the residential sphere.

The townhouses appear little altered to the exterior since construction, outside the addition of a detached brick structure to the rear of the property.

History

The subject place formed part of Crown Allotment 262 of the Parish of Prahran, its 19 acres (approximately 7.6 ha) granted to John Mullaly by 1857.⁶ 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 1850s⁷ – on land that was described in early surveys as 'heath'.⁸

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',⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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 1882, the entire Crown Allotment was acquired by the National Land Company and in September of that year consolidated with Allotment 263 (also previously owned by Mullaly), establishing a large stretch of property between Orrong and Kooyong Road.¹¹ A non-contiguous portion of this land was acquired by a 'gentleman', James Chapman, in 1883 and progressively subdivided as the

³ Philip Goad, 'The Modern House in Melbourne 1945-1975', PhD thesis, University of Melbourne [Dept of Architecture and Building], 1992, chpt 6, p2

⁴ Phillip Goad (curator), *Notable and Modern: Postwar Domestic Architecture in the City of Glen Eira*, catalogue [exhibition held at Glen Eira Art Gallery], 2001

⁵ Gee, 'An exciting group in Elsternwick', p35

⁶ Irish-born, Mullaly had immigrated to Melbourne in 1840, eventually becoming a senior officer within Customs House as well as establishing his own firm: 'Mullaly and Byrne'. ('Shipping', *Age*, 5 March 1867, p4; and 'Government Land Sale', *Herald*, 17 September 1868, p3); and *Part of the Parish of Prahran*, Department of Crown Lands and Survey, 1857, SLV, <<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/123955>>, accessed 17 June 2019

⁷ 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)

⁸ *Plan of portions marked in the Parish of Prahran*, Melbourne, Surveyor General Office, 1853, SLV

⁹ Andrew Garran, *Picturesque atlas of Australasia*, Sydney, Picturesque Atlas Publishing Company, 1888, p148

¹⁰ 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

¹¹ Certificate of Title, vol. 1396, folio. 140; and Certificate of Title, vol. 1388, folio 499

Beemery Park Estate. The subject allotment was defined in the earliest sale (see below).¹² It was acquired, in 1886, along with several other lots, by husband and wife, Frank (an attorney) and Isabel Alice Wisewould.¹³

The subject lot was then purchased by Charlotte Elizabeth Twycross in 1888.¹⁴ The wife of a well-known Melbourne merchant and art dealer/collector John Twycross, Charlotte and family lived at a nearby substantial villa *Emmarine*, at the corner of Glenhuntly Road and Beavis Street.¹⁵ In the wake of her husband's death (1899), Charlotte relocated to the subject allotment, where a timbered house with slate roof was erected.¹⁶ Her new residence was also named *Emmarine*. By this time much of Seymour Road had developed residentially and was characterised by an array of late 19th century villa designs, including the large-scale *St Lawrence* mansion (since demolished, its property now part of Harleston Park). Charlotte died in 1908 and the property passed to her adult children, John and Ida Lillian Twycross.¹⁷

Emmarine remained in the Twycross family until 1958, when it was purchased by Hirsh and Maria Frydenberg.¹⁸ By 1960, the original house had replaced by an apartment block.¹⁹



Emmarine/23 Seymour Road with Charlotte Twycross in the foreground, circa 1905
(Source: Charlotte Smith and Benjamin Thomas, *Visions of Colonial Grandeur*, Museums Victoria, 2014, p101)

Over a decade later, in May 1971, the subject site was acquired by A G G Pty Ltd & Partners and the apartment demolished. Plans were prepared at this time for the erection of eight conjoined split-level flats by architect, Harold David Shafer. By October that year, ownership of the now vacant allotment had been transferred to A B Solel Pty Ltd and Australian Architectonic Group Pty Ltd, the latter of which was registered at the Schafer household (3 Martin Road, Toorak).²⁰ Based on this connection, it is possible that Harold or another member of the family was also involved in financing the development.

The Australian born son of post-WWII Polish/Jewish immigrants, Shafer appears to have been active as a designer from as early as 1970, when (still a student) he prepared plans for a block of Modernist flats at 1421 High Street, Malvern (existing).²¹ He graduated from the University of Melbourne in 1972 with a Bachelor of Architecture (Honours).²² His thesis, *The Suburban Scene* (1971), which examined contemporary outer-suburban residential development, appears to have set the scene for the majority of his professional output, which revolved around the employment of a contemporary idiom at high-end residential projects across

¹² Certificate of Title, vol. 1396, folio 140; and Geulah Solomon, *Caulfield's Heritage, Volume 1: Caulfield's Building Heritage*, City of Caulfield, 1989, p46

¹³ Certificate of Title, vol. 1830, folio 949

¹⁴ Certificate of Title, vol. 2011, folio 163

¹⁵ Charlotte Smith and Benjamin Thomas, *Visions of Colonial Grandeur: John Twycross at Melbourne's International Exhibitions*, Museums Victoria, 2014, p15

¹⁶ Smith and Thomas, *Visions of Colonial Grandeur*, 2014, p135; and Sands and MacDougall's Directory, 1900, p258

¹⁷ Certificate of Title, vol. 3547, folio 209

¹⁸ Certificate of Title, vol. 3547, folio 209

¹⁹ *Sands and MacDougall's Directory*, 1960, p349

²⁰ Certificate of Title, vol. 3547, folio 209

²¹ Paul and Esther Shafer applied for 'naturalisation' in the early 1950s (*Age*, Friday 28 March 1952, p14); and 'Unusual Flats', *Age*, 2 May 1970, p25

²² *Degrees and Diplomas Conferred*, 15 March 1972, University of Melbourne, p89

Melbourne's suburban ring over the late 20th century.²³ Shafer designed his own Modernist style residence at 1-2 Dalriada Street, Toorak in circa 1980 (extant).²⁴

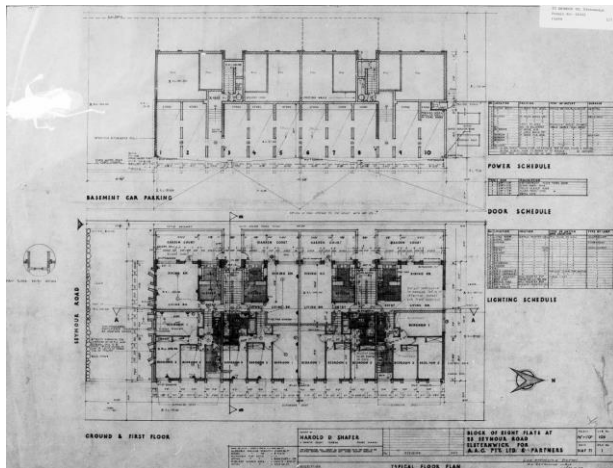
Shafer's design occurred within a broad and increasingly recognised stream of progressive architecture in operation across the municipality during the post-WWII period. While predominantly associated with Melbourne's eastern suburbs, Modernism also formed a key thread in the development of the City of Glen Eira, particularly Elsterwick 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 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.²⁵

The townhouses were erected by contractors A P Bone Construction Co by April 1973, when they were listed for sale.²⁶ The development appears to have been largely completed per Shafer's design, although a proposed courtyard wall for the rear townhouse does not appear to have been built.

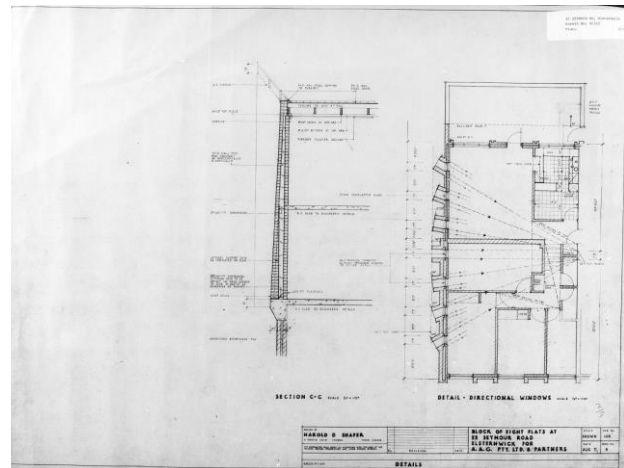
Contemporary coverage of Schafer's design was effusive:

The block of eight own-your-own flats at 23 Seymour Road, Elsterwick are exciting, because they indicate that flats can be architecturally pleasing as well as functional. From the road the face of the building looks like a cathedral organ towering over a green stretch of lawn. Black, white, black, black and white again is another initial response to these visually striking flats which from certain angles resemble an elongated chessboard Each flat has its own private courtyard, ducted heating and shagpile wall-to-wall carpet. Those on the second floor have deep flower boxes trimming the balcony. The kitchens have attractive slate tiles, a wall oven, gas hot plates, double sink, servery and ample cupboard space. Living rooms have floor to ceiling windows and have been wired for color television. There is a separate shower recess from the main bathroom which contains a bath, vanity basin and the compact laundry is partitioned off from it. All three bedrooms have built-in robes and the length of the rooms creates a feeling of space. Basement parking facilities are available Not surprisingly there are only five left – at prices from \$28,000 to \$29,000.²⁷

Over the late 20th century, the description of the development shifted; at conception it was classed as 'flats', by the late 1970s 'units' and during the 1980s 'Townhouses'.²⁸



Submitted ground floor plans



Submitted Details

²³ Harold David Shafer, *The Suburban Scene*, University of Melbourne, vol.1, 1971

²⁴ 1980, Australian Electoral Roll, Subdivision of Malvern, p58

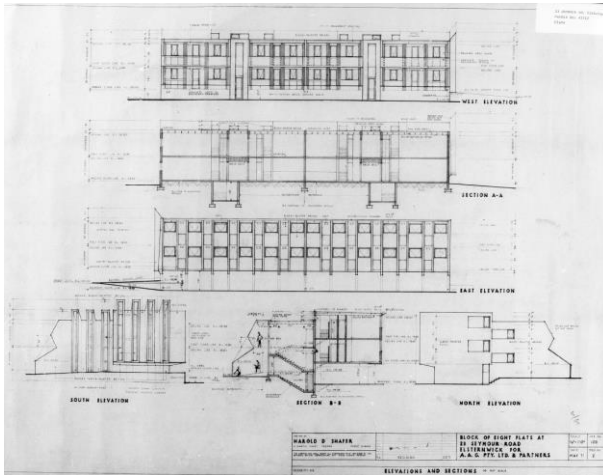
²⁵ Goad comments, 'Such domestic architecture, gleaming, 'maintenance-free', and decidedly non-referential in its language and forms, must have at the time, seemed almost alien in the otherwise conventional suburban setting'. (*Notable and Modern: Postwar Domestic Architecture in the City of Glen Eira*, np)

²⁶ Margaret Gee, 'An exciting group in Elsterwick: Flats CAN be different', *Age*, 7 April 1973, p35

²⁷ Gee, 'An exciting group in Elsterwick', p35

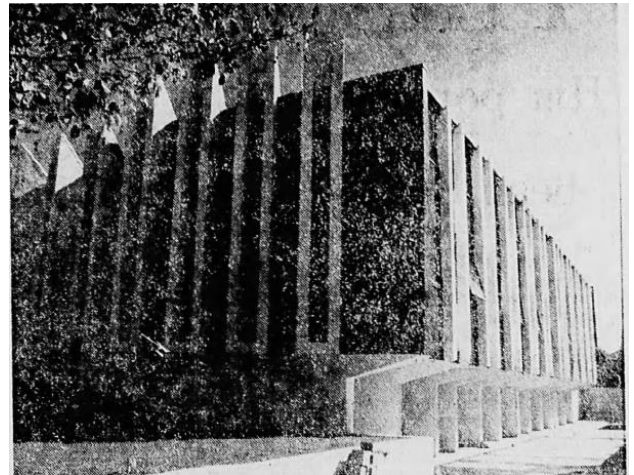
²⁸ 'Caulfield, Close Elsterwick, Unit 1, 23 Seymour Road', *Age*, 29 January 1977, p65; and 'Elsterwick', *Age*, 7 December 1985, p86

(Source: City of Glen Eira, building records, permit no. 41512)

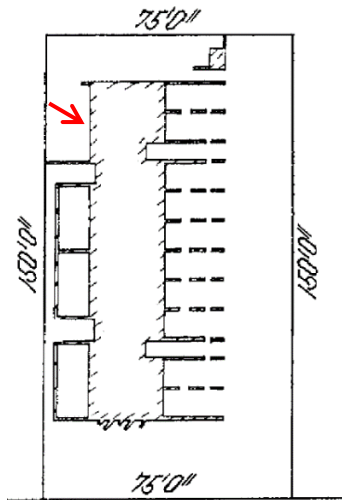


Submitted Elevations and Sections
 (Source: City of Glen Eira, building records, permit no. 41512)

(Source: City of Glen Eira, building records, permit no. 41512)



'Like a cathedral organ towering over a green stretch of lawns: a block of eight own-your-own flats in Elsternwick.'
 (Source: Gee, 'An exciting group...', Age, 7 April 1973, p35)



Unconstructed rear courtyard wall indicated (Source: Landata, RP3730)



Townhouses photographed from Seymour Road in 1977
 (Source: John T Collins, SLV, H95.200/1254)



Townhouses photographed from Seymour Road in 1977
(Source: John T Collins, SLV, H95.200/1254)

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

There are comparatively few townhouses designed in the Modernist idiom in the City of Glen Eira and none included in the Heritage Overlay, although two similarly styled houses have individual overlays. A project however is underway to review the heritage value of other houses built after WWII in the municipality.

- *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 car port supported on piloti. A butterfly roof 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.
- Three units at 38 Prahran Grove, Elsternwick (recommended for a HO) – Designed in 1966 by David Godsell in a Wrightian mode with a hipped roof, these buildings are also similarly blank to the street. A long highlight window is articulated to the public/driveway zone with a series of narrow full height windows defining the courtyard elevations. Textured concrete bricks provide a rugged external expression and cantilevered carport awnings provide a restrained alternative to the typical approach to vehicular protection.

Condition

Good

Integrity

Intact

Previous Assessment

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

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 23 Seymour Road, Elsternwick.



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