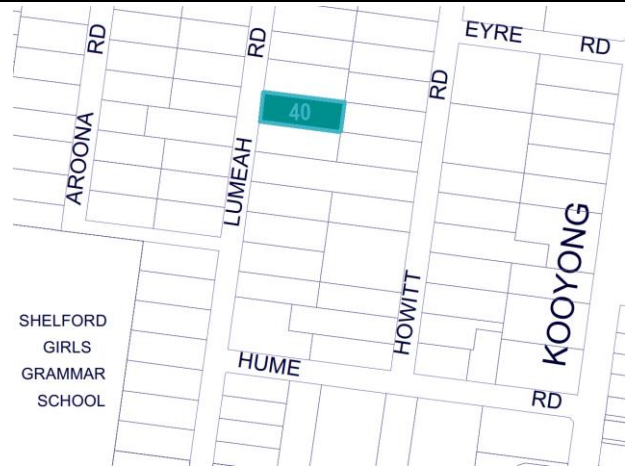


IDENTIFIER	HOUSE	Citation No	PW18
Other name/s		Melway ref	67 J1
Address	40 Lumeah Road CAULFIELD NORTH	Date/s	1990-94
Designer/s	Wood Marsh	Builder/s	Geoff Hare



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location plan and extent of HO

Heritage Group	Residential building (private)	Condition	Excellent
Heritage Category	House	Intactness	Excellent
Thematic context	6.7 Making homes for Victorians 9.3 Achieving design and artistic distinction		
Recommendation	Include on heritage overlay schedule as an individual heritage place		
Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> External Paint <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration <input type="checkbox"/> Trees		

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The house at 40 Lumeah Road, Caulfield North, is a two-storey flat-roofed reinforced concrete house on an elongated and irregular plan. Its street frontage is dominated by a blank elliptical volume penetrated by a projecting rectilinear bay with fin-like mullions and mirrored glazing, with a steel front door and a simple trabeated concrete slab carport. Erected in 1990-94, the house was designed by architects Wood Marsh.

The significant fabric is defined as the entire exterior and interior of the house, and other elements of its setting designed by Wood Marsh (including carport, front fence/gates and swimming pool). Controls over internal finishes (eg concrete walls, terrazzo floors, roughcast ceilings) and fittings (including formal staircase and original kitchen and bathroom fitouts) are deemed to be applicable because the architect has stated that the interior is inseparable from the totality of the design.

How is it significant?

The house satisfies the following criteria for inclusion on the heritage overlay schedule to the City of Glen Eira planning scheme:

- Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.
- Criterion F: Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.

Why is it significant?

The house is aesthetically significant as an outstanding and idiosyncratic example of modernist residential architecture of the 1990s. Starkly expressed with bold sculptural forms, a curved street facade, a limited palette of materials and minimalist detailing, the house defies convenient stylistic labels. While its massive raw concrete forms evoke the ruggedness of the Brutalist idiom, the projecting mirrored curtain-wall bay recalls the slickness of the International Style. The interior has prompted observers to make comparisons with Egyptian architecture and the work of the Italian Rationalists. A house that literally stopped traffic at the time of its construction, it remains a striking and wholly unexpected element in this suburban residential streetscape. *(Criterion E)*

The house is architecturally significant as a ground-breaking re-invention of the modern house. With a basic brief that effectively gave the architects a wholly free hand, the project represented a noted departure from contemporary trends in planning, materials, forms and finishes. With a cave-like foyer incorporating a grand curving staircase, and a vast entertainment area (for 350 guests) that doubled as a corridor, the interior planning challenged conventional notions of domestic living. Its limited palette of low-maintenance materials, and use of industrial finishes such as brushed metal sheeting, was then uncommon (and has only been embraced more widely since). Also unusually for the time (and still today), the project was conceived as a true totality of design, with its interior inseparable from the exterior, and the architects engaged to design furniture, fences and swimming pool, and even select the artwork. *(Criterion F)*

The house is architecturally significant as an important and influential early undertaking by the internationally-recognised partnership of Wood Marsh. One of the fledgling firm's first major projects, this high-end commission provided a rare opportunity to fully develop and articulate their architectural standpoints. Generating a flood of attention and publicity, and winning two prizes at the 1994 RAIA Awards, it remains one of the firm's best-known and most celebrated projects. It has continued to provoke scholarly and popular attention into the twenty-first century, with a photograph even gracing the front cover of the firm's recent monograph. *(Criterion F)*

History

Note: Identifying details of property owners and their families have been deleted as per Council direction

The house at 40 Lumeah Road, Caulfield North, was erected in 1990-94 for a mechanical engineer and his wife, a former teacher who would later embrace various business activities. Married by the late 1970s, the couple resided in a modest weatherboard house in Teak Street, Caulfield South. In the early 1980s, the wife became involved in a business venture with her two brothers to manufacture designer sunglasses. The brand became phenomenally successful, prompting a spin-off sun lotion (1982) and perfume range (1986). In 1991, the siblings sold the company to another prominent business family for "an undisclosed sum". As was later reported, the siblings remained with the perfume company for two years under a management contract, whereupon the two brothers went overseas while their sister decided to build a new house (*Australian Financial Review* 24/04/1995).

The intended site for the couple's new house, at 40 Lumeah Road, Caulfield North, had previously been owned by the wife's brother and sister-in-law. When they acquired it in 1982, the site was occupied by a modest six-roomed inter-war brick bungalow. In August 1990, ownership was transferred to the couple, who were then living in Webb Street, Caulfield. For the couple, the choice of architect was a foregone conclusion. Some years earlier, the wife had attended a business meeting at the South Melbourne premises of Macrae & Way, a film production company, and was diverted by its peculiar form, which included a façade with jagged parapet, circular bosses and a teardrop-shaped window. As her husband later recalled, "she said, if we ever build a house, it has to be the people who designed this building". Completed in 1985, it was the work of the architectural firm known only as Biltmoderne.

Biltmoderne was founded in 1983 by recent RMIT graduates Roger Wood, Randal Marsh and Dale Jones-Evans. The partnership rose rapidly to fame on Melbourne's architectural scene, becoming well-known for nightclub fitouts, furniture and exhibition design, and a knack for self-promotion. However, by the time that the Caulfield couple came to commission their house, Biltmoderne no longer existed as such. Co-founder Jones-Evans had left in 1987, leaving the two other partners to rebadge themselves as Wood Marsh. When approached by the couple in 1990, the firm had completed few major projects under its new name. Undeterred by the Recession that had badly curtailed the local building industry, they accepted this high-end commission with alacrity. As Marsh recently reflected, "we might not have had a lot of work on, so maybe we could put more time and effort into it than we ordinarily would".

As later reported by the *Age*, the project was unusual "because it was designed for a relatively young couple with small children, by almost equally young architects". The couple had two young sons, and were expecting a third, when they provided their architects with a brief that Marsh recalled as "disarmingly simple". Its chief requirements were that the house had privacy from the street, a sense of arrival, and sufficient living space for entertaining up to 350 guests. The husband recalls that he and his wife otherwise had no strong idea of what sort of house they wanted, observing that "if you go to someone who can design, you ask them to design. It was intended to be their design and, as long as it fitted how we wanted to live, it was up to them to design the structure". It was testament to the uncommon degree of trust between client and architect that, as was later noted, the couple "gave Wood Marsh a completely free hand with the design, even commissioning them to design the furniture, select the art works and design the landscaping, fences and swimming pool" (*Age* 16/07/1994:163)

Of the design, Marsh recently recalled that "the driving concept was to create a living environment that was a work of art, and that the building was both seamless from the transition from the inside to the out and that there is a series or sequence of spaces that you walk through: different emotions, different volumes and different experiences". Hence, the design unfolded into a linear form. An ovoid and cave-like front foyer opened into a vast elongated space, which could not only accommodate large-scale parties but also act as a corridor for daily use. This, in turn, led through an angled service core (with kitchen, bathroom and laundry) into a more informal family zone at the rear. Staircases at each end (including a grand curving formal stair in the foyer) provided access to the upper level, where the master bedroom suite occupied the top of the ovoid volume, with an *en suite* bathroom projecting to the street. The remainder of the upper level was more conventionally articulated, with a row of three bedrooms for the boys, a playroom, and an office for the husband that opened onto a private terrace.

The house was not only unusual in plan and form, but also in materials. Reinforced concrete was chosen as the principal medium, not only because of the architects' own interest in it but also as a reaction against what they perceived as the flimsy expression of much contemporary architecture at that time. Initially the ovoid front wing was to be clad in gold tiling ("it was going to be a gold egg", Marsh recalled). With this idea rejected as too expensive, it was decided to leave the raw concrete untouched. This, in turn, informed the decision to use a limited number of materials and finishes throughout. As Marsh later put it, "the house deals with the monochromatic palette: the rawness, untouched, unfinished, unpainted surface". Exposed concrete was thus combined with roughcast render and layered slate cladding; the most polished finish (literally and figuratively) was the terrazzo floor, inset with onyx chips.

Completed in 1994 at a reported cost of more than one million dollars, the house generated unprecedented attention. In July, a newspaper report article noted that it was "already causing traffic jams in the street where it has been built". The house was profiled in several leading journals. Writing in *Transition*, Helen Stuckey praised its "compositional purity" and "very restrained palette of colour overcome by a richness of texture", while observing that the upstairs areas evoked a "gentle monastic feel". In *Monument*, Ken Kennedy profiled the house (described

as a “pebblecreted arcadia”) in typically inscrutable prose of the period, noting its “defiant originality”, the “seductive chiaroscuro of its spaces”, and “a grandeur reminiscent of the urban villas of [Italian rationalist architects] Terrangi and Lingeri”. The house went on to receive two prizes at the 1994 RAA (Victorian Chapter) Awards: the coveted Award of Merit for Outstanding Architecture (Residential New Category), and the Age Public Award (“for the house that attracts the most support from readers”).

Since completion, the house has continued to attract scholarly and popular attention. In 1999, it was one of the most recent buildings to be included in Philip Goad’s *Guide to Melbourne Architecture*. It has since re-appeared in numerous books on Australian modern architecture, including Joe Rollo’s *Concrete Poetry: Concrete Architecture in Australia* (2004), Philip Goad & Patrick Bingham-Hall’s *New Directions in Australian Architecture* (2005), Leon van Schaik’s, *Design City Melbourne* (2006), Claudia Perren & Kristien Ring’s, *Living the Modern: Australian Architecture* (2007). It was subject to an entire chapter in Karen McCartney’s *70/80/90: Iconic Australian Houses*, (2012), which was recently republished in the same author’s omnibus, *Iconic: Modern Australian Houses 1950-2000* (2019). A photograph of the cave-like entry foyer also graced the front cover of the firm’s own recent monograph, *Wood Marsh Architects: Residential Work* (2012).

Description

The house at 40 Lumeah Road, Caulfield North, is a two-storey reinforced concrete house in a Late Twentieth Century Modernist style. It has an irregular linear plan made up of a series of interlocking forms, dominated at the street frontage by an angled ovoid wing with a projecting rectilinear bay. This forms an asymmetrical elevation with a stark curving wall of precast concrete panels (with expansion joints and fill holes expressed), relieved by the projecting off-centre bay. This bay, with a curtain wall of mirrored glass panels set into a rectilinear grid, forms a canopy above the front entrance, which has a polished steel sheet door. Extending to the south side of the ovoid wing is a double-carport made up of three thick concrete slabs in a simple trabeated configuration, with the outermost vertical slab extending all the way to the street to form a boundary wall. A row of three tall metal gateposts define two entrances to the property: one for vehicles, with a pair of steel-framed gates and fin-like metal slat screen, and another for pedestrians, with a solid steel sheet gate that matches the front door. The gatepost to the left of the pedestrian entry subtly incorporates a letterbox, newspaper tube and intercom.

While an internal inspection was not undertaken for this project, published photographs show the interior of the house to be substantially intact, including concrete walls, terrazzo floors, roughcast ceilings, curving staircase, glazed panels, metalwork, and original kitchen/bathroom fitouts.

Comparisons

The house is an extremely significant project in Wood Marsh’s body of work. As Marsh himself has stated, “it probably is very important because it was a seminal early work. It set the direction but it also confirmed to us our thinking in architecture”. He has also referred to it as “the first building we did where the fullness of our ideas came together. It was a major commission, a very unusual commission in an Australian context, in that the client was asking us to design the furniture and the whole environmental condition of the interior”. Alluding to the degree of attention generated by the project (not to mention awards), Marsh has stated that “it was the turning point in our career, because the outcome was quite significant”. Outside observers concur. In 1994, Ken Kennedy described house as a “controlled departure” from two earlier houses by the same architects at Eltham (1985) and Eaglemont (1988). Another review of Wood Marsh’s early work noted that the Caulfield house was a significant shift from other houses at Eaglemont (1988), Mount Martha (1988), Essendon (1989) and Mount Waverley (1989). Moreover, the influence of the Caulfield house appears to resonate in some of the firm’s later projects, such as an unbuilt scheme for a house at Port Douglas (1995), and built houses at Toorak (2004) and Flinders (2010).

As there are no other buildings by Wood Marsh (or its predecessor, Biltmoderne) in the City of Glen Eira, the house in Lumeah Road can only be compared more generally to other architect-designed houses of the later 1980s and early '90s. At that time, much new residential architecture in Melbourne was demonstrative of a Late Modern or Rationalist style, characterised by geometric massing and stark rendered walls surfaces. This was typified locally by a house at 9 Trevascus Street, Caulfield (David Edelman, 1987), architect Charles Justin's own residence at 33 Otira Road, Caulfield North (Synman Justin Bialek, 1987), and two examples of architect Nic Bochsler's work at 113 Balaclava Road, Caulfield (1987) and 15 Polo Parade, Caulfield North (1991). The last of these, while characterised by white-painted walls and blocky massing, has a projecting rectilinear bay with a square grid that invites comparison with the similar motif on the Lumeah Road house.

From the early 1990s, a number of new architect-designed houses in the study area reflected the growing interest in non-orthogonal geometry such as curves and sharp angles. This trend is evident in such houses as architect Jack Kaspi's own residence at 30 Newlyn Street, Caulfield South (1992), and others at 76 Lumeah Road, Caulfield North (architect unknown, c1995), 25 Trevascus Street, Caulfield South (Avi Milder, 1998), 8 Ward Avenue, Caulfield (Selwyn Blackstone, 1990s) and 99 Balaclava Road, Caulfield North (architect unknown, 1999). None of these houses, however, introduced such bold forms or planning as that demonstrated by the Lumeah Road house.

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