

IDENTIFIER	MURRUMBEENA BAPTIST CHURCH	Citation No	PW20
Other name/s		Melway ref	69 A4
Address	44 Murrumbeena Road MURRUMBEENA	Date/s	1961-62 1967 (addition)
Designer/s	Eric Lyon (both stages)	Builder/s	Platt Brothers (1961-62)



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location map and extent of HO

Heritage Group	Religion	Condition	Excellent
Heritage Category	Church	Intactness	Good (some changes)
Thematic context	8.1 Maintaining spiritual life 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 type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration	<input type="checkbox"/> Trees

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The Murrumbeena Baptist Church at 44 Murrumbeena Road, Murrumbeena, is a large orange brick building in a stark post-WW2 modernist style, erected in two stages to the design of the same architect, Eric Lyon (formerly of Smith, Tracey, Lyon & Brock). The older portion, fronting Murrumbeena Road (1961-62) is a tall hall-like structure with zigzag roof, narrow copper spirelets and a façade of angled bays, while the rear addition (1967) is a smaller hip-roofed wing; both components have rose windows to the Sydney Street elevation, with coloured glazing.

The significant fabric is defined as the exterior to the entire building to the extent of the original 1961-62 building and the 1967 addition. The subsequent rear addition, containing office space and such, is not considered significant.

How is it significant?

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

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

The Murrumbeena Baptist Church is aesthetically significant as an unusual example of post-WW2 ecclesiastical architecture incorporating historicist references in a modernist framework. By his own admission, Eric Lyon took inspiration from Milan's celebrated fifteenth century Late Gothic cathedral, built in the Flamboyant style characterised by a spiky roofline of pinnacles, spirelets and flying buttresses. For Murrumbeena, Lyon re-interpreted this intricate effect with a minimalist modernist sensibility, reducing it to a low zigzagging roofline (a motif popular in the early 1960s, mostly for commercial and industrial architecture) with a row of slender copper spirelets. Along Sydney Street, a parabolic arched entry bay and rose windows (with coloured glass in an abstract pattern) provide more generic historicist references. While the church has been altered by removal of the concrete block screens along Murrumbeena Road, it remains a distinctive and eye-catching example of post-WW2 ecclesiastical architecture, demonstrating a high degree of creative achievement in its deft melding of contemporary and traditional influences. (*Criteria F*)

History

The present Murrumbeena Baptist Church was erected in 1961-62, superseding an earlier building occupied by the congregation for the seven decades prior. According to the church's centenary booklet, Baptist presence in Murrumbeena dates back to 1888, when a married couple initiated a youth ministry from their home in Emily Street. As local interest burgeoned, the couple held a meeting in April 1890 "for the purpose of considering the advisability of forming a Baptized [*sic*] Church at Murrumbeena". With a committee appointed and a congregation formally established, the first service took place at the couple's home on 28 May. As membership grew, services transferred to the dining room of another congregant's house on Dandenong Road, and then to a rented hall in Neerim Road. The need for a purpose-built venue loomed large and, in 1891, the present site at the corner of Murrumbeena Road and Sydney Street was acquired. Plans for a modest timber church were prepared by architects Laver & Fick. Set well back from Murrumbeena Road, with its principal frontage to Sydney Street, the completed building was officially opened on 10 April 1892. Two years later, the all-important baptistery was added.

In 1907, with an eye on future expansion of the church facilities, negotiations took place to acquire adjacent vacant land fronting Sydney Street. A "beautiful and commodious Sunday School hall" was erected thereon, officially opening in February 1916 (*Oakleigh & Caulfield Times* 11/03/1916:4). In 1925, a Building Fund was established on the expectation that a new church would eventually be erected, although money raised was diverted to repairs on the existing building. The proposal to replace the old church gained further impetus after the appointment in 1929 of a new minister, the Reverend Ivor Hopkins, who initiated a Building Committee. Although architectural drawings for a new church were reportedly prepared at that time, nothing would eventuate for some time. A church hall was built in 1953, but it was not until later that decade that plans for a replacement church were revived by Reverend F Milton Lee, who became minister in 1957 and re-established the long-dormant Building Fund. With Lee prematurely resigning due to ill health, it was his successor, Reverend Max Kingdom, who would see the building program to fruition.

To design its new building, the church turned to Beaumaris architect Eric Lyon. Eric Donald Lyon (1918-2006) and his younger brother Ronald (1920-1996), both destined to become architects, had studied at Gordon Institute of Technology in Geelong and later at the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier. In the late 1940s, the brothers travelled to London, where each spent time in the office of leading modernists Maxwell Fry and Jane Drew. Retuning to Melbourne in 1950, Eric was invited by his former atelier classmates Des Smith and Noel Tracey to join their newly-formed partnership, which, with the addition of another friend Leslie Brock, became Smith, Tracey, Lyon & Brock. The practice thrived for a decade, best known for modern churches, parish schools and other projects for the Roman Catholic Diocese. Around 1959, Lyon and Brock left to join the office of hospital design specialists Leighton Irwin & Company, whereupon Smith & Tracey carried on under that abbreviated name. Lyon would remain with the Irwin office for the rest of his career.

Lyon's scheme for the new Murrumbeena Baptist Church had developed by mid-1961, when a daily newspaper published a perspective drawing of a building with a zigzag roofline, slender spires and decorative grille screens (*Age* 14/07/1961:12). Titled "Cathedral in miniature", the article explained that the architect took inspiration from Milan Cathedral in Northern Italy, a Late Gothic edifice with famously spiky profile. It was noted that Lyon's building would incorporate "several unusual features" including concrete slab floor (unusual at the time), and a principal facade "screened by perforated cement brick walls set like louvres, forming a colonnade" to reduce traffic noise. Inside, the church was to provide seating for 150, along with a choir of 25, "a raised tiled baptistery with mosaic background and a projection gallery for film services".

Intriguingly, the working drawings for the church, dated September 1961, bear a title block with Lyon's own name and home address rather than that of Leighton Irwin & Company, where he was employed at the time. Given that he is not known to have formally maintained his own private practice during (or prior to) his time with Irwin, it can be assumed that this was an outside commission, perhaps in an honorary capacity. A prior personal connection with the church seems likely. The Lyons were local residents in a broad sense: when they moved from Geelong to Melbourne in the late 1930s, they settled in Glen Orme Avenue, McKinnon, where Eric lived until he married in 1949 and moved to a new house of his own design at Beaumaris. His parents were still residing in Glen Orme Avenue in the early 1960s, when the Murrumbeena church was mooted. It is unconfirmed if they were Baptists themselves; in any case, their nearest such church at that time would have been the one in Vickery Street, Bentleigh, rather than Murrumbeena.

Erection of the Murrumbeena Baptist Church, by Platt Brothers of Parkdale, was slated to start in October 1961. However it was not until early the next year that it was reported that "building operations for our new church have commenced" (*Victorian Baptist Witness*, 05/04/1962:23). Seven months later, it was noted that "we look forward to the opening of our new church on 25 November" (*Victorian Baptist Witness*, 05/11/1962:27). The ceremony itself, attended by over 150 people, including a presentation to the secretary of the Building Committee, a plaque unveiled by the builder, D Platt, and greetings from local ministers, the Secretary of the Baptist Union and the Mayor of Caulfield. The first wedding took place in the church the following Sunday: fittingly, that of the minister himself, Reverend Ian Staunton.

Such was the congregation's subsequent growth that, within a few more years, it was already apparent that further expansion was needed. To allow a new wing to be added to the building, it was proposed to demolish the old timber church still standing alongside. In 1967, architect Eric Lyon (then still employed with Leighton Irwin & Company) was re-engaged to prepare plans for the new wing, which was conceived in a matching style. In more recent years, the church has been altered by removal of the concrete block façade screens and construction of a rear office wing.

Description

The Murrumbeena Baptist Church is an ecclesiastical building in the post-WW2 modernist style. Occupying a corner site, the complex comprises the original church on Murrumbeena Road, a slightly smaller rear wing (added eight years later), and more recent additions that extend further along the Sydney Street frontage. Although varying in date and expression, these various components of the building are united by a consistent palette pale orange brickwork.

The original church is a large hall-like building with zigzag roofline boldly expressed along the Murrumbeena Road side by six repetitive bays of angular eaves and along the Sydney Street side (and also the partially-concealed south elevation) by upward sloping eaves. On Murrumbeena Road, these gabled eaves align with a series of stepping angled façade bays. The final bay, at the north end, has a brick pier at the corner, defining a tall recessed porch with a raked ceiling. At roof level, each of these six gabled bays is accentuated by a tapering copper-clad spirelet, and there is a single larger spire, set further back, in alignment with the main entry on Sydney Street.

The Sydney Street elevation of the original church is a mostly blank wall, with rusticated quoining at each end and a slightly recessed central entrance bay of parabolic form. This bay contains a tapering doorway with metal-framed glazed double doors, projecting canopy roof, and a rose window with panels of coloured glass in a radiating pattern reminiscent of a Maltese cross. The corner porch contains a memorial plaque inscribed thus: THIS BUILDING / WAS OPENED TO / THE GLORY OF GOD / AND TO / THE EXTENSION OF HIS KINGDOM / AND DEDICATED BY THE PRESIDENT OF / THE BAPTIST UNION OF VICTORIA / REV JOHN MORLEY MA DIP ED / ON 25TH NOVEMBER 1962.

The rear wing is of slightly lower height and has a conventional tile-clad hipped roof. While physically connected to the earlier building, it is visually separated by a narrow niche with a vertical strip window containing panes of coloured glass. The street elevation is asymmetrical, with a conventional rectangular window to the left side and another rose window (with the same Maltese cross pattern) to the right. Further east, extending along Sydney Street, the church office is articulated as a lower gable-roofed brick building with a larger gable-roofed timber-clad hall to the rear. It has a recessed and elevated entry bay, accessed by concrete steps and a ramp.

Comparisons

Architecturally speaking, early post-WW2 places of worship in the study area (ie, those dating from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s) can be placed into two broad categories: the progressive and the conservative. The latter group effectively represents a continuation of a tradition already well established by the late 1930s, where churches were expressed as plain brick structures with gabled roofline, towers and simplified historicist details such as arches, buttresses and mouldings. This approach can be seen in such pre-WW2 examples as the Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church, 707 Glenhuntly Road, Caulfield South (O H Jorgenson, 1937) [part of HO66], the Ormond Uniting Christ at 264 Booran Road (Louis Williams, 1937) and St Paul's Church of England, Dandenong Road, Caulfield (Louis Williams, 1938-39) [part of HO14]. It was continued in the early post-WW2 era by St Kevin's Roman Catholic Church, Glen Orme Avenue, Ormond (Cyril Kelly, 1953) [part of HO75] and Bentleigh Presbyterian (now Uniting) Church, 495-497 Centre Road, Bentleigh (J F D Scarborough, 1958).

The emergence of a more progressive modernist approach, with stark articulation of volumetric forms, flat or low pitched roofs and minimal ornament, can be traced back to St Margaret's Presbyterian Church in Hotham Street, St Kilda East (K Murray Forster, 1952-53). The later 1950s saw very relatively few modern churches (or other places of worship) built in what is now the City of Glen Eira; the new synagogue for the Caulfield Hebrew Congregation at 572 Inkerman Road (Bridge, Hayden & Associates, 1958-61) was a notable exception. In the first half of the 1960s, local churches tended to embrace a wholly modernist expression, with bold box-like forms, generous windows, and ornament reduced to stone feature walls or projecting brickwork patterns, as seen in such examples as the Eastleigh Gospel Chapel at 216 East Boundary Road, East Bentleigh (1963), the Church of the Temple Society at 152 Tucker Road, Bentleigh (1964) and recently-demolished East Bentleigh Uniting (former Methodist) Church, 31 East Boundary Road, Bentleigh East (1964).

As a late example of a church that merges conservative and progressive styles, the Murrumbeena Baptist Church is perhaps most comparable to St Anthony's Roman Catholic Church at 74 Grange Road, Carnegie (T G Payne, 1963), where traditional gabled form and red brickwork is combined with a façade of red-and-white vertical stripes and a round archway with concentric banding. However, it should be noted that this church's amalgam of old and new was not conceived from scratch, but rather represented a substantial renovation/rebuilding of the congregation's original red brick Baroque-style church dating back to the 1919. In the early 1960s, the existing church was extended, its interior entirely remodelled (including a fashionable parabolic-arched sanctuary) and a new façade added, which involved the removal of a flanking pair of domed towers.

One of the most striking features of the Murrumbeena Baptist Church is its zigzag roofline, a bold motif that was fleetingly popular amongst Melbourne architects in the later 1950s and early 1960s. Most frequently, it was used to create a deliberately eye-catching form for commercially-oriented buildings such as shopping centres, showrooms, factories, hotels, motels and bowling alleys. Relatively few examples remain intact today, and only two others have been identified in what is now the City of Glen Eira: a multi-unit residential building at 218 Kooyong Road, Caulfield North (Winston Hall, 1956) and a medical centre at 868 Centre Road, Bentleigh East (architect unknown, 1960). The use of a zigzag roof on an ecclesiastical building is unusual in a broader metropolitan context, with one notable example being the contemporaneous but recently-demolished St Mark's Church of England in Sunshine (Mockridge, Stahle & Mitchell, 1960).

References

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"Cathedral in miniature", *Age* 14 July 1961, p 12.

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"Murrumbeena Church", *Victorian Baptist Witness*, 6 August 1962, pp 1, 19.

"New church opened at Murrumbeena", *Victorian Baptist Witness*, 5 February 1963, p 14.

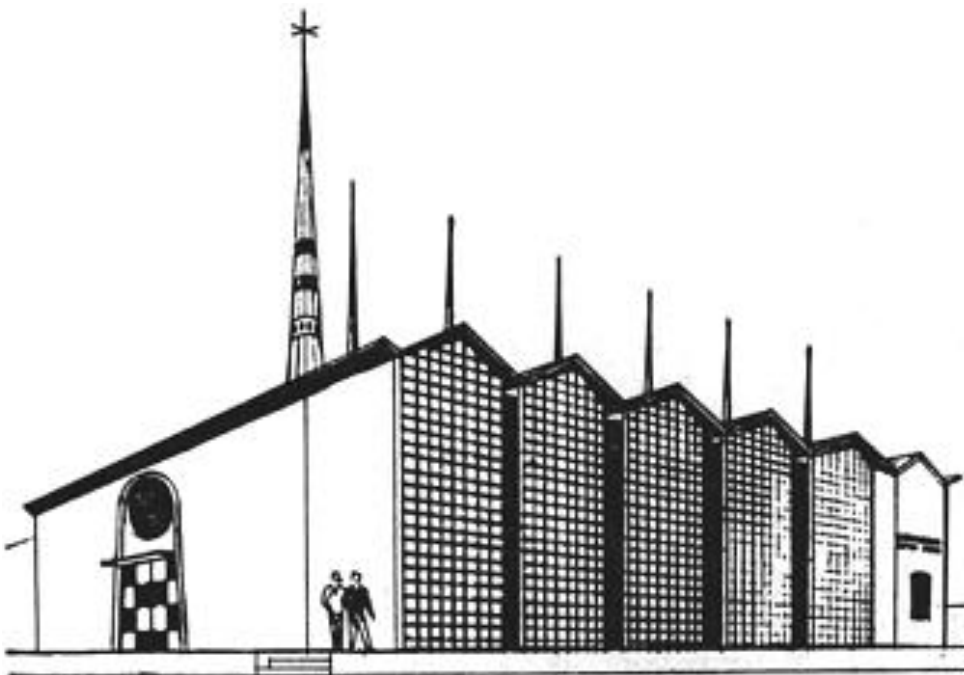
Eric Donald Lyon, "Proposed extension to Murrumbeena Baptist Church, Murrumbeena Road, Murrumbeena", working drawings, dated 22 May 1966. PB File No 12,896, *loc cit.*

Ross Harrison Snow & Geoff Barthold, *The History of Murrumbeena Baptist Church, 1890-1990*. Unpublished 24pp typescript, 1990. Copy courtesy of Glen Eira Historical Society.

Simon Reeves, "Eric Lyon", in Fiona Austin *et al*, *Beaumaris Modern* (2018), p 138.

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Eric Lyon's original perspective drawing for the Murrumbeena Baptist Church, 1961