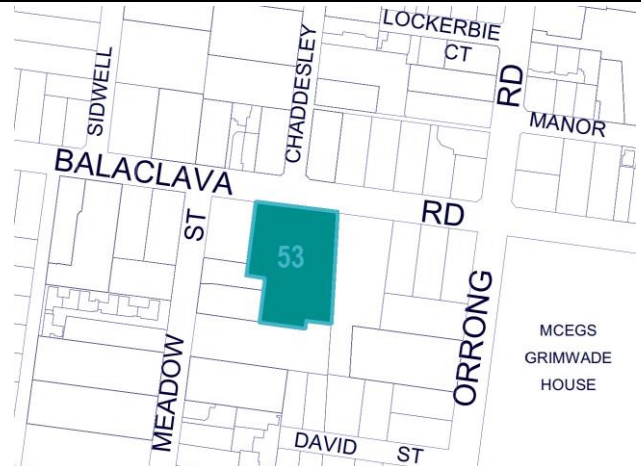


IDENTIFIER	FLATS	Citation No	PW04
Other name/s	<i>Greyfriars</i>	Melway ref	58 H11
Address	53 Balaclava Road ST KILDA EAST	Date/s	1949-51
Designer/s	Bernard Evans	Builder/s	Unknown



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location map and extent of HO

Heritage Group	Residential building (private)	Condition	Excellent
Heritage Category	Flat	Intactness	Excellent
Thematic context	6.7 Making homes for Victorians		
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 *Greyfriars* flats at 53 Balaclava Road, Caulfield, is a development of forty-three flats in two-and three-storey hip-roofed cream brick blocks around a central garden area. The two blocks facing the street are expressed in a stark Functionalist style (linked by a garden wall), while those to the rear have angled stepped facades, exposed hipped roofs and open staircases/walkways. Erected in 1949-51 as Melbourne's first flats conceived on a co-operative system, they were designed by entrepreneurial architect Bernard Evans, who was also a director of the company that built them.

The significant fabric is defined as the entire original exterior of the flats, including the garden wall that links the two flat-roofed front blocks. The front fence is not considered to be significant.

How is it significant?

The *Greyfriars* flats satisfy the following criteria for inclusion on the heritage overlay schedule to the City of Glen Eira planning scheme:

- Criterion A: Importance to the course, or pattern, of Glen Eira's cultural history.
- Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

Why is it significant?

The *Greyfriars* flats are historically significant as a milestone in post-WW2 apartment dwelling in what is now the City of Glen Eira. Designed in 1949, this complex of 43 units was the first major block of flats to be erected in the study area in the post-WW2 era, anticipating the significant influx of higher-density living that would transform the study area (and especially the former City of Caulfield) in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Conceived on a then-innovative co-operative basis, whereby ownership was vested in a co-operative society in which each resident was a member, *Greyfriars* is historically significant as the first development of that type in Melbourne. This ushered in new modern era of own-your-own flats, which subsequently became the norm and ultimately lead to the introduction of strata title legislation in the late 1960s. (*Criterion A*)

The *Greyfriars* flats are aesthetically significant as an unusual example of post-WW2 modernist architecture. While conceived as a single development, with a consistent palette of face brickwork (mostly cream), the individual blocks are expressed in contrasting forms. The two front blocks are articulated in a stark Functionalist mode, with bold rectilinear massing, corner balconies and roofs concealed by parapets, while the rear blocks have a more traditionally domestic character with exposed hipped roofs, stepped angled facades and open stairwells and walkways. With the flats arranged in a U-shaped configuration around a pleasant central garden/carpark area, *Greyfriars* remain as a highly distinctive example of a post-WW2 apartment complex. (*Criterion E*)

History

This complex of own-your-own flats was built from 1949-51 to a design by Bernard Evans. The large site, on the south side of Balaclava Road west of Orrong Road, was originally part of the even larger grounds of a Victorian mansion, *Greenmeadows*. In 1902, the property's Balaclava Road frontage was subdivided as *Lempriere's Estate*, creating ten "magnificent new allotments" fronting the main road and newly-formed Meadow Street. Lot 4, future site of the *Greyfriars* flats, spanned just over an acre and was acquired by an engineer who, circa 1908, built a grand residence that he named *Keith House*. Five years after the engineer's death in 1931, *Keith House* was offered for sale as "a commodious triple-fronted brick villa standing well within a garden of charm" (*Age* 10/10/1936:2). Subsequent owners retained the name *Keith House* until 1944, when the building was converted into a private hospital, the Keith House Convalescent Home.

In April 1949, it was reported that Keith House Convalescent Home was to be redeveloped as "a block of 44 [sic] ultra-modern flats", conceived on a new system where each of the owners would become members of a co-operative society, contributing £2,000 towards construction costs (*Herald* 40/04/1949:5). Lauded as "the first co-operative housing project of its kind in Victoria", the scheme was sponsored by estate agent F E Carolan, who stated that 150 applications had already been received, and a ballot would be held to select the final members. Plans had been prepared by architect Bernard Evans, who intended to retain the original building on the site (augmented with a rooftop sun deck), with new flats, in elongated double-storey blocks, to either side. It was further reported that "each unit will be self-contained and all will be staggered to allow maximum light. Each will consist of a lounge, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom... A separate laundry unit will have automatic washing machines and a drying room. There will be luxury swimming pool, with bays at each end and will be situated in a U-shaped courtyard".

Born in Manchester, Bernard Evans (1905-1981) migrated to Australia as a teenager with his family, who initially settled in St Kilda. He began his career as a designer/builder for a timber construction company in Box Hill before starting his own business along similar lines in 1928, building speculative dwellings in the southern suburbs and bush nursing hospitals in regional Victoria. During the 1930s, he fostered an ongoing association with West Australian businessman Claude De Bernales, for whom he designed blocks of flats in inner Melbourne, several buildings in Perth and one in London. It was only after returning to Australia in 1940 that Evans, who had

hitherto advertised himself as a designer and master builder, was registered as an architect. After exemplary service in WW2 (finishing with a DSO and the rank of Brigadier), Evans re-established private practice in Melbourne as Bernard Evans & Associates. A commercially-oriented firm, it rose to become one of Melbourne's largest, specialising in large-scale urban projects such as office buildings and apartment blocks. A forward thinker who championed innovative ideas (such as prefabricated plaster construction, own-your-own flats and integration of open space in highrise buildings), Evans also had a keen entrepreneurial streak, and served as director of various private companies involved in speculative projects and subdivisions. Active in local politics, he twice served as Lord Mayor of Melbourne and was knighted in 1962. Evans retired in 1971, by which time his firm was known as Evans, Murphy, Berg & Hocking.

Characteristically, the entrepreneurial Bernard Evans was not only the architect of the Balaclava Road flats, but also one of five directors of its development company, Greyfriars Pty Ltd, formed in July 1949. Towards the end of August, it was reported that the new company had approved the capital issue and that construction (anticipated to take 18 months) had begun (*Age* 23/08/1949:4). Over the next few months, the builder placed newspaper advertisements seeking carpenters, bricklayers and builders' labourers on site, and similar advertisements would continue to appear throughout the first half of 1950. While construction was still in its early stages, Evans, always the publicist, penned a feature article to a daily newspaper titled "So you want a home?", promoting the virtues of co-operative dwelling in general (*Argus* 21/11/1949:2). Further press attention came from architect and *Herald* property editor Harry Perrott, who mentioned the project several times in his weekly column. In May 1950, while reporting another new own-your-own flat development in South Yarra, he noted in passing that *Greyfriars*, "the first scheme of its kind in Melbourne", was now nearing completion (*Herald* 26/05/1950:13). An accompanying photograph showed one of the new blocks beside the existing residence, with a caption reiterating that the project "embraces conversion of an old house and erection of new blocks on each side to make 42 [*sic*] flats in all".

Work continued, with newspaper advertisements for plumbers appearing in the latter half of 1950. Early the next year, Harry Perrott provided a further update, noting that "the own your own flat system was pioneered in Melbourne with the launch of *Greyfriars*, Balaclava Road, East St Kilda, with 43 self-contained units now nearing completion" (*Herald* 20/01/1951:10). While newspaper advertisements for concrete labourers still appeared as late as March 1951, at least one of flats was already occupied by that time (*Age* 20/03/1951:14). In September 1952, there was a minor flurry of press attention when the first of these tightly-held own-your-own flats came up for sale on the open market. The "three-room ultra-modern unit" sold for £3,500 at auction, with a report noting that "the purchaser becomes a shareholder in Greyfriars Pty Ltd, owners of the 43 flats in the block; under agreement, he shares maintenance costs with the other flatholders" (*Argus* 21/10/1952:3). Greyfriars Pty Ltd also maintained ownership of the convalescent home, which operated from the site until the late 1950s, when the building was demolished, allowing for the creating of an open landscape court between the flats (*Age* 22/03/1958:46).

Description

The *Greyfriars* flats at 53 Balaclava Road, Caulfield, comprise a development of 43 flats (evidently misreported, in some contemporary newspaper accounts, as 44 or 42 flats) in a series of two-and three-storey hip-roofed buildings of face brick construction (mostly cream) arranged around a central garden and carpark area. The street frontage is dominated by a pair of blocks linked by a garden wall. Expressed in a slick Functionalist style, these blocks have stark rectilinear massing and parapets that conceal their hipped roofs. Of identical but mirror reversed design when seen from the street, each block has large bays of windows and recessed corner balconies (with low metal balustrades) at the garden wall end. This wall, which forms a vehicular gateway to the rear of the site, consists of a row of five fin-like brick piers with recessed spandrels between. The third spandrel bears the name of the flats and street number in cursive mild steel lettering.

At the rear, the central open space is flanked by an elongated rectangular block of flats to the east (left) side, and a series of stepped blocks along the west (right) side. Of matching cream brick construction, these rear flats have a more traditionally domestic feel, with exposed hipped roofs (ie not concealed by parapets), broad eaves and prominent chimneys. There is also variation in elevational treatment to the courtyard facades, with some blocks having angled stepped façades with large windows (including corner windows) and others with smaller windows and entrances that open onto shared concrete slab walkways and staircases with simple metal balustrades. Some flats to the west side have integrated garages at the lowest level, accessed via a second driveway off Balaclava Road. The central open space, enclosed on all four sides, incorporates a graveled parking area, lawns, concrete pathways, informal garden beds (some defined by volcanic rock borders) with low plantings, and a few mature trees.

Comparisons

Dating from 1949, the *Greyfriars* flats were one of the first modern-style apartment blocks erected after WW2 in what is now the City of Glen Eira. At the local level, its nearest counterpart would be the block of flats slightly further east, at 124 Balaclava Road (Mordechai Benshemesh, 1950-51). These are not only comparable in date but also have much in common, stylistically, with the two front blocks of flats at *Greyfriars*: a stark Functionalist expression with plain cream brick walls, parapeted roof and corner windows. The blocks of flats to the rear of *Greyfriars*, with a more traditionally domestic expression of exposed hipped roofs, are more comparable to such local examples as the *Kenleigh Court* flats at 166 Glen Eira Road, Elsternwick (unknown, 1954). The distinctive facade stepping, to maximize sunlight penetration into individual units, is a feature that would only become more widespread in much later blocks of flats, typified by 321a Orrong Road (Kurt Popper, 1958), 66 Downshire Road, Elsternwick (unknown, 1960), and 37 Orrong Road, Elsternwick (unknown, 1965). The *Greyfriars* flats can thus be considered as a groundbreaking example of post-WW2 apartment design, in a municipality where such development would have a significant presence in the 1950s, '60s and '70s.

With several contemporary reports describing *Greyfriars* as Melbourne's first co-operative flat development, it is worth pointing out that the concept became immediately popular and spurred a number of similar ventures in rapid succession. Not coincidentally, most of these were initiated by companies whose directors included F R Lee, who had held that position with *Greyfriars Pty Ltd*. Amongst the co-operative flat developments to be completed by Lee's companies were *Ravendene* at 205 Domain Road, South Yarra (1950-51), *Merton Court* at 169 Ormond Road, Elwood (1951-52), *Sheridan Close* at St Kilda Road, Melbourne (1951-53) and *Elizabeth Court*, Queens Road, Melbourne (1952-53). The last two, at least, are confirmed to have also been designed by Bernard Evans. These four early blocks of co-operative flats otherwise differed in scale and form. *Ravendene* and *Merton Court* were fairly simple three-storey flat-roofed blocks, providing 16 and 34 bachelor flats respectively, while *Sheridan Close* was a vast five-storey development of 76 units with undercroft carparking, a monumental Georgian-inspired street frontage, and side walls that were angled (as Evans had previously done at *Greyfriars*) to provide balconies.

References

"Co-operative flats", *Herald*, 30 April 1949, p 5.

"Work begins on another 'owner' plan", *Herald*, 26 May 1950, p 13.

David Dunstan, "Evans, Sir Bernard (1905-1981)" in Diane Langmore (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 17 (2007).

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