

IDENTIFIER	House and flats	Citation No	PW12
Other name/s	Popper House and <i>Gordonlea</i> Flats	Melway ref	67 F2
Address	61-63 Gordon Street ELSTERNWICK	Date/s	1956
Designer/s	Kurt Popper	Builder/s	Unknown



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location map and extent of HO

Heritage Category	Residential building (private) House/Flats	Condition	Excellent
		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 residential complex at 61-63 Gordon Street, Elsternwick, comprises a two-storey dwelling (No 63) and an adjacent two-storey L-shaped block of flats (No 61), consistently expressed with stepped façades, plain cream brickwork, low skillion roofs and large window bays. It was designed in 1956 by Austrian émigré architect Kurt Popper to provide a residence for his own family, with the adjacent flats as an investment.

The significant fabric is defined as the exterior of both buildings and the brick boundary wall.

How is it significant?

The complex 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.
- Criterion H: Special association with the life or works of a person, or groups of persons, of importance in our history.

Why is it significant?

The house and flats are aesthetically significant as a distinctive example of post-WW2 modernism. Considered as a cohesive single development, the two components display a consistent modernist expression of stark volumetric massing, planar walls, wide window bays and low skillion roofs with broad timber-lined eaves. At the same time, undue repetition is avoided, so that the house and the flats remain readily interpreted as two related but separate buildings. While the entire complex is characterised by a minimalism that hints at the architect's European background, the single dwelling to the north, which was his own residence, is granted emphasis with eye-catching feature walls of random stonework and dark-coloured brick. (*Criterion E*)

The house and flats are architecturally significant for their innovative design and planning. Described on the working drawings as a "maisonette and six flats", this unusual combination of a large but compact single family dwelling with an attached block of lettable flats represented a major departure from established traditions of multi-unit living in Melbourne. Slightly predating a building of similar concept at 218 Kooyong Road, Caulfield (Winston Hall Associates, 1957-59), this distinctive residential development represented a hybrid typology that was rarely seen in the study area the 1950s and remained uncommon even into the 1960s. (*Criterion F*)

The house and flats are historically significant for associations with Austrian émigré architect, who conceived them as a residence for his own family with a lettable investment property alongside. Popper, who began private practice in Melbourne in 1946, became sought-after as a designer of residential projects for fellow European émigré clients, and is acknowledged as a leading exponent of higher-density living in Melbourne (ultimately designing some of the first highrise apartment blocks in the CBD and inner suburbs). His own house in Gordon Street, where he lived for more than four decades before his death in 2000, provides evidence of the significant local presence of a resident architect who undertook a notable amount of work in what is now the City of Glen Eira (and especially Caulfield and Elsternwick), while the adjacent *Gordonlea* flats represents one of Popper's earliest (of many) multi-unit projects in the municipality. (*Criterion H*)

History

Dating from 1956, the house and adjacent block of flats at 61-63 Gordon Street, Elsternwick, were designed by Austrian émigré architect Kurt Popper, respectively as his own residence and an investment property.

Born in Vienna, Popper (1910-2008) was the son of the proprietor of a joinery and shopfitting factory. Spurred by an early interest in the theatre, he commenced stage design studies at the University of Applied Arts and secured several commissions for set design before transferring to an architecture course at the Academy of Fine Arts. Establishing private practice, he undertook a few small commercial projects (mostly shop fitouts) before the political situation obliged him to leave Austria. After a brief stint in Paris, he migrated to Australia via London and settled in Adelaide in April 1939. Briefly employed by an architectural firm that closed due to WW2, Popper completed a single private commission before moving to Melbourne. Commencing private practice in Collins Street, he designed a block of flats for former friends in Adelaide before he had to close his office due to the worsening wartime conditions. Popper found work with an engineering company and then joined the Housing Commission of Victoria in 1945. While there, he obtained a residential commission that enabled him to re-launch private practice, with an office in East Melbourne. His practice boomed from the late 1940s, focusing on residential commissions for a clientele mostly comprising fellow European émigrés. His output included numerous blocks of flats, a field in which Popper became a leading exponent well into the 1960s. Popper's long association with the thriving post-WW2 migrant community also saw him design buildings for Jewish groups, including synagogues, schools and aged care homes.

In 1943, during his early years in Melbourne, Popper met and married his German-born wife, who had migrated with her parents four years earlier. The couple initially lived in a flat in St Kilda, but later moved to Malvern East. Plans to build a house for themselves date back to early 1951, when the couple acquired a vacant block in Trevascus Street, Caulfield South. This, however, was evidently sold when they later purchased a block in a new subdivision in Elsternwick. Known as the *Nathan Estate*, this was created from a ten acre site that comprised nearly half of the grounds of the historic *Ripponlea* mansion (then owned by the family after whom the new estate was named). In what was reported at the time to be “the most important inner subdivision of recent time”, the surplus land was carved up to create thirty residential allotments with frontages to Glen Eira Road and an extension to Gordon Street (*Herald* 24/04/1953:10). As a major release of undeveloped land in this well-established suburb, sites in the *Nathan Estate* were keenly sought-after. Amongst those to buy into the estate were Kurt Popper and his wife, who acquired the titles to two adjacent blocks, Lots 17 and 18, on the east side of Gordon Street.

As depicted on working drawings dated September 1956, Kurt Popper proposed to develop his double-width block with a two-storey single dwelling for himself and his family (at what would become No 63), and an adjacent two-storey block of six flats (No 61). The former component, laid out on a compact rectangular plan, provided a double garage, kitchen, study and ample living space downstairs (combined lounge/dining, breakfast room and small playroom) with three bedrooms (for the Poppers and their two sons) and a bathroom upstairs. The flats, although physically connected to the house, were not directly accessible from it, and were articulated as a separate building on an L-shaped plan. A common stair lobby, opening at the junction of the plan, provided communal access to three flats at each level: a pair of two-bedroom flats and one smaller studio flat, with an open-planned living/dining/sleeping area.

The working drawings show that the development was not commissioned by the Poppers *per se* but rather by Gordonlea Pty Ltd, a family investment company that they formed in September 1956 (with its registered office at 128 Jolimont Road, East Melbourne, where Popper maintained his architectural practice); the flats themselves were identified by the name *Gordonlea*. Title records indicate that ownership was vested in Gordonlea Pty Ltd in April 1957. When the company was de-registered in 1978, the title was transferred to Popper and his wife. The property has since remained in the family’s ownership; following Popper’s death in 2000 and that of his widow some years later.

Description

The Popper property at 61-63 Gordon Street, Elsternwick, comprises two discrete buildings: the architect’s own residence (No 63) and an attached block of flats (No 61), which combine to form an U-shaped footprint. The two components are similar in expression, form, finishes: double-storey cream brick buildings with skillion roofs and broad timber-lined eaves. The simpler of the two buildings, the block of flats has an L-shaped plan and presents an asymmetrical double-fronted elevation to the street, with tall rectangular windows in rows of three or six. The shared entrance to the common stairwell is set into the far corner of the double-fronted façade, marked by a tall multi-paned window bay. The adjacent single residence is similarly expressed at its upper level, with a bay of six tall rectangular windows. At the lower level, however, it is distinguished by a full-width recessed porch with a slightly projecting concrete slab ceiling supported on paired metal pipe columns and, at the far right end, a projecting stone-clad wing wall that also forms the dividing wall to the adjacent flat-roofed double garage. The recessed porch, further enlivened by a feature wall of dark-coloured Roman brickwork, also has a large tripartite window bay and a recessed entrance at the garage end.

A low garden wall, in matching cream brick, extends along the street boundary of the property, retuning along the side of the driveway to No 63.

Comparisons

Within the City of Glen Eira, Kurt Popper is represented by numerous buildings that include houses, flats and community buildings dating from the early 1950s to the late 1970s. His earliest surviving building in the study area appears to be a house at 317 Glen Eira Road, Caulfield (1952), a hip-roofed cream brick dwelling of relatively conventional form. Another house, at 112a Kooyong Road, Caulfield (1953) is similar but has since been rendered. An example at 4 Morrice Street, Caulfield (1954), which is probably Popper's earliest local project in a wholly modernist mode, is a two-storey skillion-roofed brick house that has much in common with the design of his own house in Gordon Street, designed two years later, although it is simpler in form and lacks the embellishments such as the feature walls of random stonework and dark-coloured Roman bricks. Considered in isolation, the *Gordonlea* flats at No 61 are the earliest known apartment block that Popper designed in the study area, significantly predating subsequent examples at 399 Alma Road, Caulfield North (1960), 178-180 Glen Eira Road, Elsternwick (1962), 4 Edith Street, Caulfield (1965) and 68 Howitt Street, Caulfield North (1968).

At a micro level, the residential development at 61-63 Gordon Street can also be compared to a perhaps surprising number of houses that Popper designed in the same street. In what would have been an unusual circumstance at the time, several other families who purchased land in the new *Nathan Estate* became aware that Popper was designing his own house, and they engaged him to design theirs as well. Consequently, the street is known to contain at least five other examples of his work. Three of these (at Nos 56, 68 and 73, all dating from 1956) are conservative in style, with triple-fronted facades and conventional hipped roofs. A two-storey example at No 72 and a single-storey one at No 77 (both 1956), are both more representative of Popper's taut modernist aesthetic, with flat roofs, expansive windows and planar walls enlivened with decorative embellishments such as slate cladding or projecting brickwork. Popper's own house, at No 63, remains the standout.

References

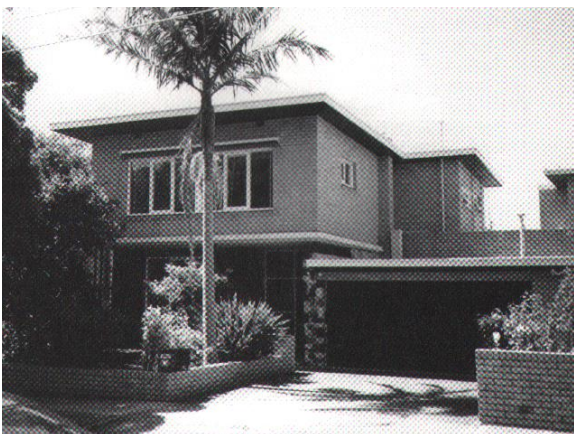
Kurt Popper, "Proposed maisonettes and six flats at Gordon Street, Caulfield, for Gordon-Lea Pty Ltd", working drawings, dated September 1956. City of Caulfield Permit No 20,099.

Certificate of Title, Volume 817, Folio 721, created 1957.

Harriet Edquist, *Kurt Popper: From Vienna to Melbourne, Architecture 1939-1975* (2002).

Identified by

Built Heritage Pty Ltd (also flagged by Heritage Alliance and RBA Architects)



Undated photograph of Kurt Popper's own house at 63 Gordon Street
Source: Harriet Edquist, *Kurt Popper: From Vienna to Melbourne*.