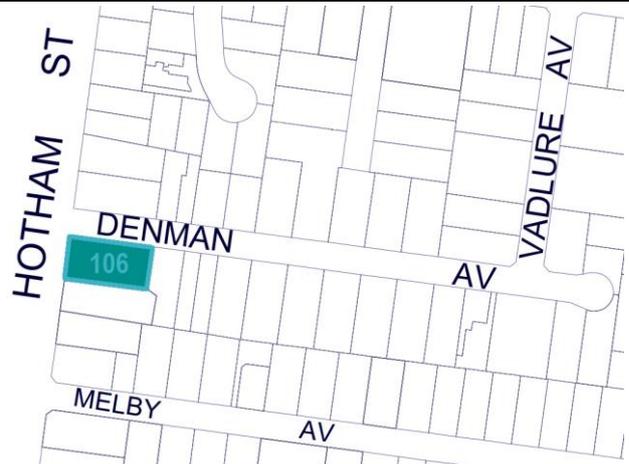


<b>IDENTIFIER</b>	St Margaret's Presbyterian Church	<b>Citation No</b>	PW14
<b>Other name/s</b>		<b>Melway ref</b>	58 F12
<b>Address</b>	106 Hotham Street ST KILDA EAST	<b>Date/s</b>	1953-54
<b>Designer/s</b>	K Murray Forster	<b>Builder/s</b>	R E Gyngell



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, October 2019



Location map and extent of HO

<b>Heritage Group</b>	Religion	<b>Condition</b>	Excellent
<b>Heritage Category</b>	Church	<b>Intactness</b>	Excellent
<b>Thematic context</b>	8.1 Maintaining spiritual life 9.3 Achieving design and artistic distinction		
<b>Recommendation</b>	Include on heritage overlay schedule as an individual heritage place		
<b>Controls</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> External Paint	<input type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration	<input type="checkbox"/> Trees

## Statement of Significance

### What is significant?

St Margaret's Presbyterian Church, at 106 Hotham Street, St Kilda East, is a cream brick church comprising a gable-roofed hall-like nave with a flat-roofed front foyer wing that incorporates a projecting covered walkway. Erected in 1953-54 to a design by leading Presbyterian architect K Murray Forster, the building represented the culmination of several decades of fundraising for a congregation that had occupied the site, in a series of 'temporary' buildings, from 1916.

The significant fabric is defined as the exterior of the entire building, including the original stained glass windows.

### How is it significant?

St Margaret's Presbyterian Church 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?*

St Margaret's Presbyterian Church is significant as an excellent and remarkably intact example of an early post-WW2 church in the newly emerging modernist style. With its simple expression of a hall-like nave, low gabled roof, projecting walkway and stark brick walls with varied fenestration and virtually no applied ornament, the church represented a bold departure from the established pre-WW2 convention where designers of churches felt obliged to reference historicist detailing (such as buttresses and arches) associated with the traditional ecclesiastical styles. Forster's building, entirely devoid of such allusions, anticipated a new approach to church design that would become the norm in the later 1950s and 1960s. (*Criterion E*)

St Margaret's Presbyterian Church is significant for its creative achievement in taking inspiration from modernist church architecture that K Murray Forster had seen during a recent European trip, completed just six months before finalising his working drawings. While contemporary accounts of his building broadly acknowledged these Continental sources, noting the influence of recent church architecture of Holland and Switzerland, a specific single precedent has been identified in the eerily similar Swiss Reformed Church at Zurich-Balgrist (Hans & Kurt Pfister, 1950-52). St Margaret's Church, the unusual design of which generated an uncommon degree of comment in the daily and architectural press, is thus notable as an example of a Melbourne architect directly introducing progressive European influences into the local architectural scene. (*Criterion F*)

### **History**

St Margaret's Presbyterian Church was built in 1953-54 for a congregation that dates back to 1911, when existing churches at St Kilda East (St George's, Chapel Street) and Elsternwick (St John's, Glenhuntly Road) were approached to provide for services in Balaclava. As the suburb was well-developed by that time, there was some difficulty in securing a site. In 1913, vacant land at the corner of Hotham Street and Denman Avenue was acquired for £1,208 (mostly donated by a wealthy local resident and the congregation of St George's). With further progress delayed by the onset of WW1, it was not until December 1916 that services began in a temporary building to accommodate 150 parishioners. Five years later, this was replaced by a larger church hall, similarly intended for temporary use until a church proper could be built alongside. As the congregation grew during the 1920s, the matter became more urgent. In 1928, a Church Building Fund was initiated and, two years later, it was reported that "strenuous efforts are being made towards erection of a new church on land at the corner of Hotham Street and Denman Avenue" (*Age* 13/09/1930:21). However, further development was hampered by the Depression. By 1936, the Church Building Fund had exceeded £1,000, and it was hoped that a new building could be completed to coincide with the Presbyterian Centenary Year in 1937. This, however, did not eventuate, and the project would be delayed, yet again, by the onset of WW2.

The scheme was revived in 1947 after the appointment of a new minister, Reverend J Symington. A New Church Building Sub Committee was formed, and architect K Murray Forster engaged to design the building. The son of a Presbyterian minister, Karl Murray Forster (1906-1967) studied at the University of Melbourne Architectural Atelier while articulated to F Bruce Kemp. Registered as an architect in Victoria in 1930, he relocated to Perth for a few years before returning to Melbourne in 1935 and resuming private practice in Collins Street. In the late 1930s, he often worked with his former boss Bruce Kemp on Presbyterian projects including churches, kindergartens and homes, and this continued in the early post-WW2 era. In 1951, Forster entered into partnership with Keith Reid, another leading Presbyterian architect, as a means to maintain his practice during a planned six-month overseas tour. The partnership, styled as Keith Reid & K Murray Forster, was not a success and ended after Forster returned from Europe in November 1952. He thence practiced under his own name, still specialising in work for the Presbyterian Church. In 1963, the practice became Murray Forster & Walsh after the elevation to partnership of longtime employee Allen Walsh, who would continue running the office after Forster's early death four years later.

Forster's working drawings for the St Margaret's Presbyterian Church are dated April 1953, barely six months after he returned from his overseas trip. The drawings (which bear the initials of his assistant, Allen Walsh, as delineator) depict a cream brick building of simple form: a hall-like nave (to accommodate 200 people) with low gabled roof, covered walkways and a blank façade with a Latin Cross flanked by vertical strip windows. In July 1953, it was reported that the construction contract (worth £8,439) had been awarded to builder R E Gyngell (*Construction* 29/7/1953:9). On 22 August, the foundation stone was laid by the Reverend Principal Hugh McLean. Nine months later, on 1 May 1954, the completed church was officially opened by the Right Reverend Alan Watson, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria. Forster's original scheme had proposed a set of stained glass windows representing the Twelve Apostles, although only one of these (depicting St Andrew) was completed in time for the opening. The new building otherwise included several items (including elders' chairs, communion table and baptismal font) that had been donated over the years, and placed in storage, in anticipation of completion of the building.

The simple architectural form of the church attracted a great deal of attention. One newspaper report of the foundation stone ceremony, illustrated by a perspective drawing, observed that "a style of architecture popular for Presbyterian churches in Switzerland and Holland has been drawn on for the modern church building" (*Argus* 01/08/1953:9). After the official opening the following year, another newspaper was moved to report that "the modern building is unusual" (*Age* 29/04/1954:17), while the Presbyterian state newsletter noted that "the new structure has modern features that are as convenient as they are attractive" (*Messenger*, 30/04/1954:9). Later that year, the weekly property column of the *Herald* newspaper praised the building as "the first Presbyterian church built in Victoria in advanced contemporary style". Its simplified form and internal planning, noted too have been influenced by recent European developments in church architecture, was described as "a complete departure from tradition" (*Herald* 20/08/1954:13). The church subsequently received brief mentions in two architectural journals, lauded for its "restrained interior, effectively using simple materials" (*Cross Section* 11/1954:3) and as "one of Australia's few modern churches" (*Architecture & Arts*, 02/1955:8). In 1956, it was one of only two post-WW2 churches to be included in a slender architectural guidebook published for those visiting Melbourne for the Olympic Games.

## Description

St Margaret's Presbyterian Church at 106 Hotham Street, East St Kilda, is a cream brick building in a post-WW2 modernist style. Starkly expressed, it comprises a large hall-like nave with low gabled roof, a projecting flat-roofed entry wing, and a smaller gabled-roofed rear wing. The nave has a virtually blank façade to Hotham Street, with a single off-centre vertical strip window that is partially screened by an inset white-painted Latin cross motif. Along its side (Denman Avenue) elevation, the nave has a larger double-height vertical window at the chancel end and a row of four smaller rectangular windows. All of these windows have projecting white-painted surrounds. The large window is multi-paned, with inset stained glass, while each of the smaller windows is divided asymmetrically into four panels.

The front wing, facing Hotham Street, has exposed beams and rafters to its very low-pitched roof, which extends northwards to form a covered walkway to the main entrance on that side. A multi-paned horizontal window bay extends along the eaves line on the Hotham Street side, returning to form a highlight window over the entrance facing Denman Avenue. The entry has glazed sidelights and a pair of panelled timber doors, painted pale blue, each emblazoned with a St Andrew's cross (a symbol of Presbyterianism) in contrasting white. The covered walkway, extending across a paved brick terrace with steps at the outer end, had pairs of metal pipe columns, and a simple metal pipe balustrade, finished in the same pale blue colour scheme.

The foundation stone, set into the north wall of the nave alongside the entry porch, is inscribed as follows: TO THE GLORY OF GOD / THIS STONE WAS LAID BY / REV PRINCIPAL H MCLEAN MA MSC, DD / 22 AUGUST 1953 / MINISTER/ ARCHITECT K MURRAY FORSTER ARIBA / BUILDER R E GYNGELL.

## Comparisons

While K Murray Forster is well known as a prolific architect of buildings for the Presbyterian denomination, St Margaret's Church appears to be his only such project in what is now the City of Glen Eira. Forster, who briefly lived in Caulfield in the mid-1930s, is otherwise represented in the study area by some residential projects. His best-known local building (albeit not for reasons he would appreciate) was the *Willas* flats in Labassa Grove, Caulfield (1936), a two-storey apartment block erected in the front garden of the eponymous mansion, *Labassa*. Notoriously obstructing views of the mansion, the flats were purchased by the National Trust in the 1980s and promptly demolished to reinstate the original setting. Forster's post-WW2 output is represented by a timber house at 24 Atkinson Street, Murrumbeena (1953) that, with its C-shaped courtyard plan, skillion roof and wide chimney, was praised as "a good example of the modern trend in design for timber homes" and one that (like his contemporaneous design for St Margaret's Church) incorporated ideas that the architect had seen during his recent visit to Europe (*Argus* 25/06/1953:15). Although still standing, the Murrumbeena house has been much altered.

Considered in Forster's wider body of church architecture, St Margaret's Presbyterian Church was the first in a series of churches that he designed in a stripped-back modernist mode influenced by Continental European precedents. His much-published United Protestant Church in Woomera, South Australia (1954), although of stone construction, is otherwise eerily similar to St Margaret's in its simple hall-like form, low gabled roof, covered walkways and blank façade with Latin Cross motif and vertical strip windows. Echoes of this approach recur in several of Forster's subsequent Presbyterian churches in Victoria, including those at 146 High Street, Heathcote (1955) and 92 Main Street, Pakenham East (1960). In identifying a possible Continental source for Forster's inspiration, contemporary allusions to recent Swiss churches (for the Reformed, Calvinistic and Roman Catholic denominations) provide a crucial clue. Research to date suggests that the most likely precedent was the Reformed Church at Zurich-Balgrist, erected in 1950-52 to a design by architects Hans & Kurt Pfister that had won a limited competition in 1945. This church, simply expressed as a rectangular hall with low gabled roof, stark rendered walls, covered walkways and a blank façade with two vertical slit windows flanking a Latin cross, eerily anticipates Forster's subsequent scheme for St Margaret's.

At the time of completion, St Margaret's Church was described as the first Presbyterian church in Victoria in the modernist style. Within the local context of the City of Glen Eira, it is certainly one of the first modernist churches, of any denomination. In the first half of the 1950s, virtually all new churches in the study area harked back to the inter-war tradition where historicist styles associated with ecclesiastical architecture (typically Gothic or Romanesque) were adapted with varying degrees of rigour. This approach is typified by a number of cream brick churches of contrasting style: St Kevin's Roman Catholic Church in Glen Orme Avenue, Ormond (Cyril Kelly, 1953-54), in an Early Renaissance mode, the Ormond Church of Christ at 587 North Road, Ormond (Louis Williams, 1954-55), nominally Gothic with arched windows and token buttresses, and the Bentleigh Presbyterian (now Uniting) Church at 495-97 Centre Road, Bentleigh (J F D Scarborough, 1958) in a Romanesque mode. It was not until the early 1960s that local churches began to emerge in a more overtly modernist style, as demonstrated by St John's Anglican Church at 624 Centre Rd, Bentleigh (Gawler, Churcher & Boardman, 1961-62), the former Brethren Gospel Hall (now Eastleigh Gospel Chapel) at 216 East Boundary Road, Bentleigh East (G James Rattray, 1961-62), and the Church of the Temple Society at 152 Tucker Road, Bentleigh (William Blauch, 1963-64).

## References

K Murray Forster, "St Margaret's Presbyterian Church, Hotham Street, Balaclava", working drawings, dated June 1953. PB 9,942, Unit 1156, VPRS 7882/P1, PROV.

"Swiss style", *Argus*, 1 August 1953, p 9.

"New church at Balaclava", *Age*, 24 April 1954, p 17.

"New church in modern style", *Herald*, 20 August 1954, p 13.

*Cross Section*, No 25 (November 1954), p 3.

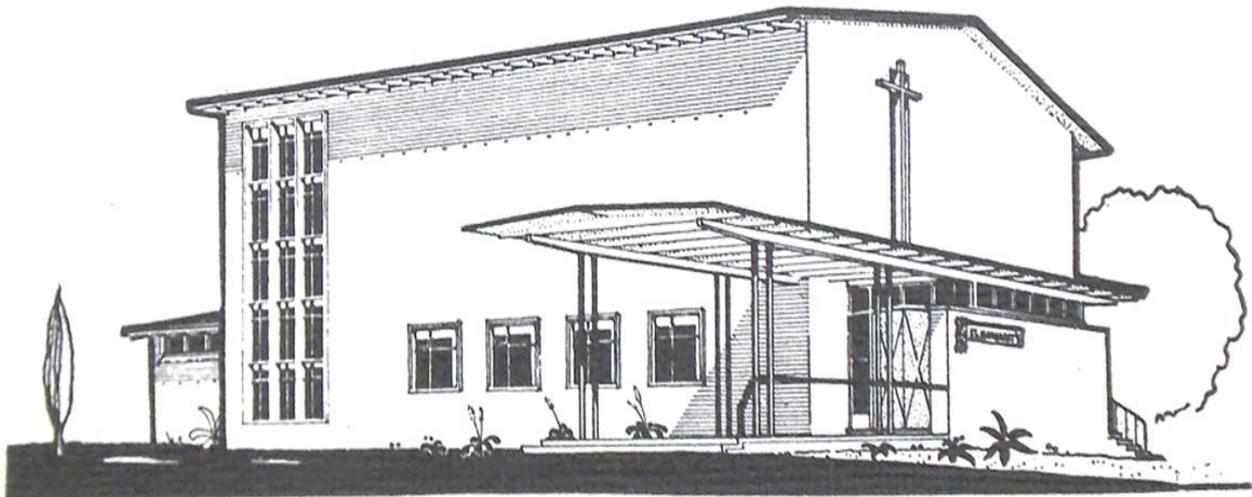
"Modern Presbyterian Church for East St Kilda", *Architecture & Arts*, February 1955, p 8.

Donald C Ward (ed), *Guide to Victorian Architecture* (1956), p 15.

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## Identified by

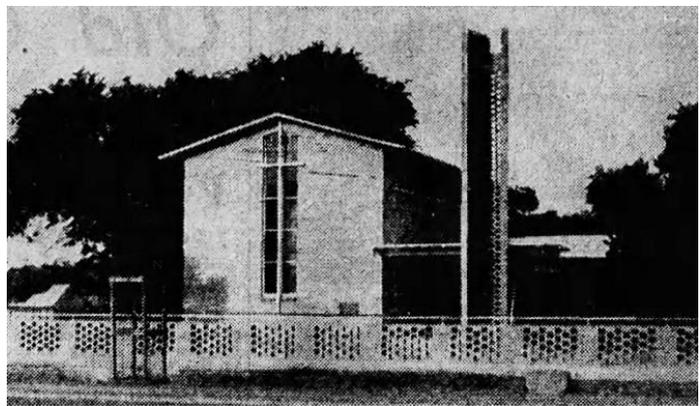
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*Original perspective drawing by the office of K Murray Forster & Associates  
source: Architecture & Arts, February 1955*



*Reformed Church at Zurich-Balgrist  
(Hans & Kurt Pfister, 1950-52)  
source: [www.de.wikipedia.org](http://www.de.wikipedia.org)*



*Presbyterian Church at Heathcote  
(K Murray Forster & Associates, 1955)  
source: Age, 3 March 1956*