

<b>IDENTIFIER</b>	FLATS	<b>Citation No</b>	PW06
<b>Other name/s</b>		<b>Melway ref</b>	58 K12
<b>Address</b>	124 Balaclava Road CAULFIELD NORTH	<b>Date/s</b>	1950-51
<b>Designer/s</b>	Mordechai Benshemesh	<b>Builder/s</b>	Harry Kinsman



<b>Heritage Group</b>	Residential building (private)	<b>Condition</b>	Excellent
<b>Heritage Category</b>	Flat	<b>Intactness</b>	Excellent
<b>Thematic context</b>	6.7 Making homes for Victorians		
<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?*

The building at 124 Balaclava Road, Caulfield North, is a large flat-roofed two-storey cream brick block of flats in a stark Functionalist style. Occupying a corner site, it has bold rectilinear massing and elongated elevations with rendered banding, wide windows, corner balconies with balustrade walls, and entries with cantilevered slab canopies and tall multi-paned window bays. Built in 1950-51 as an investment property for a Polish émigré couple, the flats were designed by Palestinian émigré architect Mordechai Benshemesh.

The significant fabric is defined as the exterior of the building and the matching dwarf wall along each of the two street boundaries. The garage block, to the rear, is not considered significant.

### *How is it significant?*

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

- Criterion D. Important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments.
- Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics

### *Why is it significant?*

The block of flats is architecturally significant as an exceptional example of a modern apartment building in the minimalist tradition of progressive Continental European counterparts. Comprising seven compact and tightly-planned two- or three-bedroom units with private balconies and shared stairwells, the development was conceived for the *existenzminimum* lifestyle that was the norm in larger European cities. This authenticity is underscored by the fact that the building was commissioned by a Polish-born couple, designed by a Palestinian-born architect, and initially tenanted exclusively by Eastern European émigré families who would have been well accustomed to living in such premises. Designed in mid-1950, it can be considered as one of the earliest manifestations of the post-WW2 modernist apartment blocks that would become such a defining characteristic of the Caulfield area in the later 1950s, '60s and '70s. (*Criterion D*)

The block of flats is aesthetically significant as a highly confident expression of the European Functionalist style. This is evident in its stark rectilinear massing and uncommonly elongated street facades, where the innate horizontality is heightened by rendered banding, wide rectangular windows and the conspicuous articulation of concrete slabs to the floors and canopies of corner balconies. Characteristically, the strong horizontal emphasis is relieved by the stepped facades and the contrasting vertical focus on the two street entrances, where tall-multi-paned window bays articulate the stairwells within in the best Functionalist tradition. Occupying an uncommonly large corner site along a major thoroughfare, this prominent building remains an eye-catching and distinctive element along the Balaclava Road streetscape. (*Criterion E*)

### **History**

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

This block of flats on the north-east corner of Balaclava Road and Leaburn Avenue, was built in 1950-51. For many years prior, the large site (and corresponding double-width block on the other corner) was owned by a venerable Flinders Street tailor. The bigger of the two sites, with frontage of 124 feet to Balaclava Road and 180 feet to Leaburn Avenue, it was partly subdivided in the early 1940s for erection of the *Devon Flats* at what is now 27 Leaburn Avenue. At the time of the tailor's death in 1947, the remaining land, measuring 124 feet by 125 feet, was among the last undeveloped holdings on this part of Balaclava Road. Promoted as being "suitable for a large house or block of flats", it was auctioned in October 1948 and realised the enviable sum of £5,580, or £45 per foot (*Argus* 28/10/1948:5). However, the site was not developed immediately and came up for sale again a year later, "offered firstly as one lot and, if not sold, then offered as two separate lots" (*Age* 15/12/1949:8). Nothing came of this and, six months later, the land was offered for sale yet again. Although advertised as "two perfect home sites, each 62 feet by 125 feet", it was also noted that "alternatively, the land complies with building regulations for seven units (one maisonette as a home and six flats as an investment)" (*Argus* 05/04/1950:11).

The new landowners were a Polish-born married couple. Born in the early 1900s, he migrated to Australia in the late 1930s and settled in Carlton North (*Argus* 03/12/1943:12). By the early 1940s, he had his own clothing manufacture business in Flinders Street (*Age* 17/04/1943:10). At the time he and his wife bought the Caulfield North site, they had recently moved to Elwood. This is likely how they came into contact with architect and fellow Elwood resident Mordechai Benshemesh, whom they engaged to design their block of flats. Palestinian-born Benshemesh (1911-1993) studied architecture in Tel Aviv, a city that became a major epicentre for the International Style due to an influx of German Jewish migrants in the 1930s; such was the proliferation of slick new apartment blocks (many designed by Bauhaus-trained expatriate architects) that Tel Aviv acquired the nickname 'White City'. After completing further studies in London, Benshemesh migrated to Australia in 1939 and spent the next decade working for various local architects, notably Arthur Plaisted and Harry Johnson, before opening his own office around 1950.

From the beginning, Benshemesh focused on apartment blocks. While early examples were modest in scale, they soon became larger and more ambitious. After completing several highrise blocks in the inner suburbs in the late 1950s, Benshemesh attracted considerable attention with his thirteen-storey *Edgewater Towers* on the Esplanade at St Kilda (1960), one of the tallest private apartment blocks yet built in Melbourne. Continuing to specialise in such projects, he became one of Melbourne's acknowledged leaders in the field.

The working drawings that Benshemesh prepared for the Polish couple's project on Balaclava Road, dated May 1950, proposed a two-storey building on an L-shaped plan, providing four flats to each level, separately accessed via two common stairwells. A carparking area was provided at the rear and, while the drawings depicted an elongated garage/laundry block along the north site boundary, a scribbled note indicated 'garage omitted'. In October, the City of Caulfield issued a building permit for a "block of seven flats, 124 Balaclava Road", citing also the couple's name and private address in Elwood. The builder was listed as H Kinemer [sic], of 1a Ridgway, Moorabbin. Further research confirms this to be Harry Kinsman, listed in electoral rolls at that address and identified as a bricklayer. Construction of the flats was still underway in early 1951, when a newspaper notice advertised for a "bricklayer's labourer, top money, Kinsman's job, 124 Balaclava Road, Caulfield" (*Age* 12/02/1951:21). Work was evidently nearing completion towards the end of the year, when plasterer William Chudleigh similarly advertised for "plasterers, tradesmen, flats, 124 Balaclava Road, North Caulfield" (*Age*, 10/10/1951:21).

The first tenants of the new apartment block were recorded early the following year (*Argus* 02/04/1952:21). Not coincidentally, given that the owners were Polish and their architect was Palestinian (and, moreover, had designed them a building in the Continental tradition of minimalist flat-dwelling), all of the original tenants were European émigrés. Most were Polish: three had been born in Bialystock, another hailed from nearby Bielsk Podlaski and one more came from Częstochowa. One other tenant identified as Polish but was born in Ukraine, while three more were Czechoslovakian and one other Austrian. Some of these original or early tenants remained living at 124 Balaclava Road into the 1960s and beyond.

## Descriptions

The building at 124 Balaclava Road, Caulfield North, is a large two-storey flat-roofed cream brick block of flats in a stark Functionalist style. Laid out on an L-shaped footprint across an expansive corner site, the building presents elongated elevations to each of its two street frontages. Similar but not identical, the elevations exhibit the characteristic rectilinear massing, with expansive rectangular window bays and stepping wall planes to allow for the inclusion of corner balconies with solid brick walls, expressed concrete floor slabs, and matching cantilevered slab canopy roofs. This dominant horizontal articulation is heightened by rendered stringcourses at both levels, aligning with the splayed window sills and the capping to balcony walls.

On each of the two street elevations, a shared entrance is marked by a projecting concrete slab canopy with a tall-multi paned window above, indicating the communal stairwell within. Entrances have timber doors with a vertical row of three portholes, flanked by a multi-paned sidelight. On the symmetrical Leaburn Avenue elevation, the entry/stairwell bay is centrally located while on the asymmetrical Balaclava Road elevation, it is off-centre, towards the far right (east) end. The Balaclava Road elevation also incorporates two porthole windows, with rendered surrounds, toward the far left (west) end.

The property has a matching cream brick wall along its two street boundaries. At the outer end of each frontage, a concrete paved driveway provides vehicular access to the rear of the site, where there is paved carparking area and detached flat-roofed carport block of utilitarian form.

## Comparisons

While Mordechai Benshemesh designed many blocks of flats in Melbourne in the 1950s and '60s, research to date has identified no other examples within what is now the City of Glen Eira. A block of flats mentioned (but not illustrated) in a 1960 journal article was reportedly located at 100 Dandenong Road, Caulfield. This address, however, does not exist; it is more likely to refer to a three-storey block of “brand new ultra-modern bachelor flats” that was erected during that year at 110 Wellington Street (at the time, an extension of Dandenong Road) in nearby St Kilda (*Age*, 04/03/1961:36). Benshemesh’s work is otherwise well represented in the former City of St Kilda. Of his extant blocks of flats in that area, the most pertinent comparator to 124 Balaclava Road would be the contemporaneous three-storey example at 38 Westbury Street, St Kilda East (1950), which is very similar in its use of plain cream brickwork, stark rectilinear massing and corner balconies with solid balustrade walls.

Within the City of Glen Eira, Benshemesh’s building at 124 Balaclava Road can be compared more broadly to other blocks of flats designed by European-trained émigré architects in the 1950s. The earliest of these, however, tend to date from the second half of that decade. A two-storey block at 63 Gordon Street, Elsternwick (Kurt Popper, 1956), which forms part of a development with the architect’s own residence at No 61, is somewhat similar in its plain brickwork, stepped façade and vertical stairwell window. However, it is articulated in a more relaxed modernist style typical of the later 1950s, with broad-eaved skillion roof rather than parapeted flat roof seen at 124 Balaclava Road. The same can be said of other blocks of flats dating from the latter part of the decade, such as those at 312a Orrong Road (Kurt Popper, 1958) and 7 Kooyong Road (Ernest Fooks, 1958).

Occupying a corner site with cream brickwork, stepped facades, corner windows and concrete slab porch canopies, the *Kenleigh Court* flats at 166 Glen Eira Road, Elsternwick (designer unknown, 1954) are perhaps more directly comparable to 124 Balaclava Road, although they have a far more conventional hipped roof clad in terracotta tiles. Ultimately, the building that is most similar to the early Benshemesh flats would be the first stage of the *Greyfriars* flats, located nearby at 53 Balaclava Road (Bernard Evans, 1949-51), which is expressed in a similarly stark functionalist style with parapeted flat roof and corner balconies with solid balustrade walls.

## References

Mordechai Benshemesh, “Proposed plans for 7 brick flats at 124 Balaclava Road, for [redacted], esq”, working drawings, dated 24 May 1950. City of Caulfield Permit No 11,719.

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, “Mordechai Benshemesh (1911-1993)”, *Dictionary of Unsung Architects*, [www.builtheritage.com.au/dua\\_benshemesh.html](http://www.builtheritage.com.au/dua_benshemesh.html)

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

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