

Identifier Flats
Formerly "St Kiernan's Flats"



Not within a HO area

Address 51 Ormond Esplanade
ELWOOD
Category Residential: apartment
Constructed 1939
Designer J H Esmond Dorney

Significance

What is Significant?

51 Ormond Esplanade is a three-storeyed flat-roofed rendered brick apartment building in the inter-war Functionalist style, characterised by a stark and volumetric form with fin-like brick elements, ribbon windows, and corner windows. The flats were designed in 1939 by noted local architect J H Esmond Dorney as a speculative project for his mother, Mrs M L Dorney.

How is it Significant?

The flats are of aesthetic and architectural significance to the City of Port Phillip

Why is it Significant?

Aesthetically, the flats are significant as a fine, relatively intact and somewhat unusual example of a large apartment block in the inter-war Functionalist style, characterised by flat roof, steel-framed corner windows, ribbon windows and a vertical emphasis. Its stark and volumetric composition is comparable to several other blocks of flats in the municipality (mostly in St Kilda), but, although slightly altered, it stands out for its unusually bold composition and austere rendered walls (rather than the more typical face brick).

Architecturally, the former *St Kiernan's Flats* are significant as one of the best examples in Elwood of the work of J H Esmond Dorney, a prolific local architect and one-time employee of Walter Burley Griffin who became a leading exponent of the Functionalist style in Melbourne in the 1930s and, after the War, a highly regarded modern architect in Tasmania.

Other Studies

Peck von Hartel Trethowan. *City of St Kilda Twentieth Century Architectural Study*. 1992.

Description

51 Ormond Esplanade comprises six flats within a stark and volumetric flat-roofed rendered brick Functionalist-style building. The triple-fronted façade, balanced but not symmetrical, has a central projecting three-storey portion, flanked by narrower wings, three and four storeys high, with disparate setbacks. The central portion is articulated by an orange brick chimney, forming a dominant vertical element, while the adjacent entry wing has a similar but narrower fin-like pier. Both have horizontal bays of steel-framed windows alongside, the former wrapping around the corner. The north wing has a vertical ribbon window to the stairwell, and two short horizontal ribbon windows at the fourth floor. The front door, shaded by a concrete slab sunhood, is set into an orange brick dado, which returns along the side of the projecting central wing and then further forward, forming a low wing wall. The partly-concealed south wing is more conventional in detail, with standard timber-framed double-hung sash windows.

History

A building permit for these flats was issued by the City of St Kilda on 12 April 1939, with the finished building first appearing in the *Sands & McDougall Directory* a year later, listed as 'flats'. From 1941-48, they appeared as "St Kiernan's Flats" – an allusion to their original owner, Mrs Marie Louise Dorney, née Kiernan. In 1948, she transferred the name to another block that she owned, at nearby No 57. Mrs Dorney was, in fact, responsible for several speculative flat projects in Elwood in the 1930s, all designed by her son, local architect J H Esmond Dorney. This association began when Dorney converted their family home, *Chenier*, into flats in 1934, which prompted his mother to engage him to design *Antigone* flats at 34 Docker Street (1937) and then these flats on Ormond Esplanade. The latter was extended (not to Dorney's design) with a fourth floor flat for A E Kershaw, for which a permit was issued on 15 December 1941.

James Henry Esmond Dorney (1906-91) trained in the office of Walter Burley Griffin in the mid-1920s but, unlike Griffin's other employees, entirely rejected the Prairie School aesthetic and, on commencing his own practice in 1930, designed in conventional styles such as Tudor Revival before developing his own variation of the Functionalist style in the later 1930s. A resident of Elwood since a teenager, Dorney designed numerous buildings in the area, including several speculative apartment projects for his mother and his father-in-law. After the War, Dorney moved to Tasmania, where he became an innovative and highly-regarded modern architect.

Comparative Analysis

As epicentres for inter-war flat development, Elwood and St Kilda are well represented by examples in the Functionalist style that was popular in the second half of the 1930s. While the idiom was characterised by a concern for pure expression of function, and a common vocabulary such as flat roofs and ribbon windows, there was still a degree of variety in local manifestations: at one end of the spectrum were those buildings (often in face brick) realised as stark volumes, and, at the other, those buildings (often rendered) in a less severe style, enlivened with curving corners or balconies and stylised ornament such as fluting, stringcourses and capping.

The St Kiernan's Flats are an example of the former. The best examples in the municipality are those by the highly-regarded firm of Mewton & Grounds: *Woy Woy* at 77 Marine Parade, Elwood (1936) in rendered brick, and *Bellaire* at 3 Cowderoy Street, St Kilda (1936) in face brick. Another fine example in face brick is *Park Court* flats at 473 St Kilda Street, Elwood, by equally celebrated architects Seabrook & Fildes (1938). Lesser examples in St Kilda, by as yet unknown designers, include *Burnett Lodge*, 9-13 Burnett Street (c.1940), *Mereen* flats, 40 Burnett Street (c.1940), and *High Royd* flats, 36 Robe Street (1930s). All of these, however, are relatively compact, stark buildings of face brick; St Kiernan's stands out amongst them with its particularly broad façade, its dominant vertical fin-like elements, and its smooth rendered walls.

Recommendations

recommended inclusions:

Schedule to the Heritage Overlay Table in the City of Port Phillip Planning Scheme

References

Sands & McDougall Directory, various.

City of St Kilda Building Permit No 10,942, dated 15 December 1941 [alterations]

