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HERITAGE ASSESSMENT - Preliminary

Place: Catholic Church of Our Lady (former)
77 Park Street, South Melbourne
For: The City of Port Phillip
Date: 31 August 2017



Introduction

This preliminary assessment has been provided at the request of the City of Port Phillip. Following a desk top comparison with the other churches in the City of Port Phillip, and with other individually mapped places accorded individual heritage significance (shown red on the Heritage Policy Map), I conclude that the former Church of Our Lady is highly likely to be worthy of local heritage significance as a stand-alone property and should be assessed for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay.

History and Historical Context

The Church was constructed in 1928 to the design of Architect WP Connolly in the Romanesque style. The following are copies of newspaper articles printed at the time of the open of the church which set the historical context for the construction of the building:

South Melbourne Catholic Church of Our Lady The Age, 11 December 1928, p.12
New R.C. Church Opened at South Melbourne. In order to avoid overcrowding at SS. Peter and Paul's Roman Catholic Church, South Melbourne, another church, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, has been erected at the corner of Park and Stead streets. It is a substantial brick building. With the site, the cost is about £7000. Many gifts of church furnishings have been made, including the altar, given by Mrs. M. Kelly, and two statues given by Mr. and Mrs. D. E. Vaughan. The church was blessed and opened on Sunday afternoon by Archbishop Mannix before a large gathering, including many members of the clergy, Mr. Murphy, M.L.A., Mr. Disney, M.L.C., Mr. R. Williams, M.L.C., and the mayor of South Melbourne (Cr. Esmonde). Advocate, 13 December 1928, p.30
Our Lady's Church, South Melbourne Fr. Collins' Fruitful Pastorate A church dedicated to Our Blessed Lady has been erected at the corner of Park and Stead streets, South Melbourne, and it will be a great convenience to those living at a distance from the parish church of SS. Peter and Paul. Built of brick in a populous part of South Melbourne, the new church is a fine structure, and, with the site, cost £7000. The foundation-stone was blessed and laid on August 15 last by his Grace the Archbishop of Melbourne, the Most Rev. Dr. Mannix, who blessed the completed church on Sunday afternoon last before a very large gathering. Two Masses will be said in Our Lady's Church every Sunday. The altar is the gift of Mrs. Marv Kelly, and two statues will be given by Mr. and Mrs. D. E. Vaughan. His grace was supported by Very Rev. R. Collins, P.P.; Very Rev. Prior Power, O.C.C.; Very Rev. J. Sullivan. S I; Very Rev. P. Meenagh, C.M.; Rev. T. Walsh, P.P.; Rev. A. Martin. P.P., Rev. T. F. O'Sullivan, P.P.; Rev. T. McCarthy, P.P.; Rev. F. Conlon. P.P.; Rev. M. Flannery. P.P.; Rev. M. Nolan. Rev. J. Kelly, Rev. J. Wall. Rev. V. Allen. Rev. L. Godwin, Mr. L. Murphy. M.L.A.; Mr. R. Williams, M.L.C.; Mr. H. Disney. M.L.C.; the Mayor of South Melbourne (Cr. Esmonde), and Cr. J. Behan.
PASTOR'S LAST APPEAL. The Very Rev. R. Collins said in all probability it would be his last public appeal, and he considered he would be wanting in gratitude if he did not publicly acknowledge the unfailing kindness that he had always received from the people of South Melbourne. He had been a church beggar for a number of years, and had been fairly successful owing to the kindness and generosity of his friends. (Applause.)

MAYORAL CONGRATULATIONS

The Mayor of South Melbourne (Cr. Esmonde) said he regarded it as a privilege to welcome his Grace the Archbishop to South Melbourne. He thought they would all agree that a fine site for the new church had been selected by Fr. Collins, and the church would be a great convenience to hundreds of people. He joined with the parishioners in warmly congratulating Fr. Collins on the beautiful church he had erected. (Applause.)

GENEROUS SUBSCRIPTIONS.

An eloquent appeal for funds was made by the Very Rev. J. Sullivan, S.J., who made appreciative reference to Fr. Collins' zealous labours in Preston, Northcote, Clifton Hill, and South Melbourne, and said that Fr. Collins had built many fine churches in the metropolitan area during his long and fruitful ministry. (Applause.) A long list of subscriptions was read by Fr. Collins, who acknowledged eight donations of £100 each and several of £50 each. Fr. Collins thanked all the donors, and also expressed his deep thanks to the architect (Mr. Connolly) and the contractors (Messrs. Reynolds Bros.).

HIS GRACE'S WARM COMMENTATION

His Grace the Archbishop said the new church was needed in the neighbourhood because

SS. Peter and Paul's Church was a good distance away. The new church was a credit to Fr. Collins and to his people, and the architect and contractors were to be commended for their fine work. Fr. Collins had entered on the work without any misgiving, and his confidence in his people had been shown by the generous subscriptions he had received. The subscription list began at a high standard and came down very slowly, and scarcely anybody seemed to be missed. Apparently Fr. Collins had searched Jerusalem with lamps, and just like an income tax collector, had managed to get something out of everybody. He felt confident that Fr. Collins had not come to the end of the list yet, and that other subscriptions would come to hand. Fr. Collins said he had been a beggar all his life, and that it was his intention to cease begging in future. Judging by the success of the present appeal, he thought Fr. Collins would be doing a foolish thing if he stopped yet. When money came in so well, it was well worth continuing. In his long experience, he never knew anyone who had taken up professional begging to give it up. However, whether Fr. Collins begged or not, he hoped he would be spared not merely to clear off the debt on the church, but also to spend many fruitful and happy years in South Melbourne. (Applause.) Most cordially he desired to congratulate Fr. Collins on the erection of the church and on the splendid result of the appeal. He hoped God would bless all the generous donors, who had shown recognition of the zealous work of Fr. Collins in making further provision for the spiritual requirements of his people; (Applause.)

Industrial Peace. Signs of a Better Understanding. The generous subscription list read by Fr. Collins did not indicate that the people thought that Australia had reached a dead end. Australia had passed through a bad time, and a great deal of distress had been caused by the dislocation of industry, but he hoped that better times would come before long. A conference of representatives of employers and employees had been sitting in Melbourne, and he hoped as a result of the deliberations that the parties would come to understand each other better, and would hammer out a plan whereby the relations between capital and labour would be improved considerably. Everything possible should be done to get rid of the dislocation of industry and violence. In Melbourne there had been outbreaks of violence recently, but he hoped there would be no more such occurrences. Every decent person regretted the happenings, and trusted that they had ceased. The holding of the conference was a sign of a better understanding between capital and labour. Possibly some people would object to the conference sitting on a Sunday, but he thought the members could not do anything better on a Sunday than try to make greater peace. The conference had his good wishes and prayers, and he believed it had the good wishes and prayers all of all those who were interested in peace in the community and progress in Australia.

Physical Description

The former Catholic Church of Our Lady is in a sturdy Romanesque design under a single roof of Marseille pattern tiles, with gables to either end, and with buttresses between the five arched windows to either side. The red brickwork is relieved by render to the arched heads and hood mouldings ending in square bosses of pressed cement bearing a diaper pattern. The frontage is an appealing, confident and composed composition of rendered elements against the brick wall and piers. The frontage is composed of three round arches; a gable niche, the large north tracery window and the arch over the entry vestibule. The vestibule is a simple chamfered form set forward of the paired, and rectangular, buttresses which flank the main window and which are connected with the gable niche across their top by a machicolation with four corbelled arches either side of the niche. The rendered cornice line under the side eaves is continued across the front to provide a spring for the arch over the main window. This tracery window is composed of two tiers of led lights with rounded, rather than lancet, arches. The five arches of the low lights rise from behind the balcony over the entry vestibule up to the cornice line with three arched lights and side spandrels extending to fill the main central arch set below the machicolation. The wall and gable are set behind the central buttressed composition with the gable surmounted by a render cross and with square brick piers anchoring the corners of the frontage.

Comparative Analysis

Historically the church was constructed in response to the expanding population in the area now covered by Port Phillip. In this sense, it can be compared with the 1922 former Methodist church at 288 Richardson Street, Middle Park, the 1929 Catholic Churches of St Colmans at 291 Carlisle Street, Balaclava and St Columbas at 26 Glen Huntly Road, Elwood, and with the Methodist Scotts Church Elwood constructed 10 years later. A more restrained comparison is St Anselms of the Church of England at 41 Park Road in Middle Park. Also demonstrative of a growing population and with perhaps greater design flair, comparison can be made with Melbourne's First Church of Christ Scientist at 340 St Kilda Road constructed in 1920. The church is a fine example of the application of the Romanesque style that was also adopted by the Catholic Church in Balaclava and Elwood in the same period. These other examples as larger more elaborate buildings exhibiting towers however the robust form of the entry co representative of the application of the Romanesque style to churches in the period.

In 1928 St Peter and Paul's Catholic Church on the corner of Dorcas and Montague Street, was 1.4 Kilometers away and a 20 minute walk at a time that car ownership particular amongst people of middle and lower income, was rare.

The church was constructed at time of heightened sectarian division of the Australian people. There was open tension between Protestants and Catholics, aligned with strife between Capital and Labor, residual from a similar divide between support of Empire and the anti-conscription at World War 1, and strife in Ireland leading to its independence in 1922. In this context under the leadership of Archbishop Mannix, Catholic identity and the construction of churches for a growing population, was seen as a matter of pride and importance to the Catholic participation in the development of the nation.

Statement of Significance (DRAFT)

What is significant?

The former Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady, a confident and sturdy Romanesque design in red brick with rendered elaboration. Relatively intact. Now used as a child care centre.

How is it significant?

The Church is locally of historical (Criterion A) aesthetic (Criterion E) and of representative (Criterion D) significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is it significant?

Historically (Criterion A), the church is significant as demonstrative of the growing Catholic population during the inter-war period and the consequent need for an additional church to serve the eastern side of the parish of St Peter and Paul's. Constructed in a period of high tension between Protestants and Catholics, which faded only with the post-war influx and assimilation of many nationalities, the church is demonstrative of the importance of Catholic identity, presence and contribution to Australian society.

Aesthetically (Criterion E), the church is a fine and intact example of an inter-war church in the Romanesque Style. As a sturdy and confident representative (Criterion D) of the Romanesque style as applied to churches it has a robust and pleasing independent presence.

Conclusion

It is my conclusion on the basis of the above the it is highly likely that the former church would be found to have heritage significance on the basis of its historical and aesthetic value, locally

to the City of Port Phillip. It is also my view that the church is a good exemplar of the application of the Romanesque style to churches in the period and instructive by comparison with the other inter-war churches of the City of Port Phillip. On this basis, it is likely that the building would be demonstrated to have significance a representative of the type of class of building within the City. It is my recommendation that the property should be assessed for inclusion in the Heritage Overlay and if required provide with interim protection.



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