

## 15 Finlayson Avenue, Mt Martha

### Statement of Significance

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#### "What is significant?"

The house at 15 Finlayson Avenue Mt Martha was constructed in 1980 by noted environmentalist and building designer, Alistair Knox (1912-1986).

Its construction makes extensive use of recycled materials including: SEC (State Electricity Commission) power poles (some with signs still carved into them), planks from the old Geelong Pier, second hand bricks, and an antique stained glass window from Ross House, Kew.

The interior features a double-height, open plan living-kitchen area on the ground floor, with 3 bedrooms and a bathroom also on this level. There is a large open fireplace of hand made bricks; the kitchen utilises recycled cabinetwork and bricks. The interior walls and cathedral ceilings are lined with cedar boards. Numerous glazed doors open onto an encircling veranda.

A mezzanine incorporating master bedroom, en-suite, and parent's retreat opens onto the central space. Terraces at either end of the mezzanine level overlook the garden to front and rear.

The site planning takes advantage of a small creek that runs through the property, which has been integrated into the landscape design and is crossed by an ornamental bridge. Existing indigenous vegetation was retained in close proximity around the house. The informal front & back garden was designed to complement the house and includes stands of ti-tree, rambling and climbing roses, mixed with native and fruit trees, cottage plants, herbs and ferns.

#### "How is it significant?"

15 Finlayson Avenue Mt Martha has aesthetic and historic significance to the Mornington Peninsula Shire.

#### "Why is it significant?"

15 Finlayson Avenue has *aesthetic significance* for its design by Alistair Knox, a noted designer of houses who considered the environmental qualities of the locality and attempted to minimise the impact of construction upon the environment.

The aesthetic qualities are evident in the careful selection of materials (many of them recycled materials of great character); the quality of detailing in the use of materials; the spatial qualities of the interior (particularly the high central space), the

spatial integration of the house with its landscape setting, and the garden of informal indigenous plantings.

Constructed in 1980, the house is a fine local (in the Shire context) example of Knox's late style, which integrated ideas he had developed over the previous 4 decades. Its location in Mt Martha is indicative of the growing fame of this designer, as clients sought him out for projects distant from his business locale in Eltham.

Alistair Samuel Knox (1912-1986), architect and builder, was born on 8 April 1912 at South Melbourne. In 1941, while working as a bank clerk, he began a part-time pottery course at Melbourne Technical College but his studies were interrupted by wartime commitments as a reservist. After the war Knox studied architecture and building construction at Melbourne Technical College. While he did not complete the diploma, the course influenced him: in 1948 he resigned from the bank to explore the possibilities of building his own style of house.

Drawn to the Montsalvat artists' colony centred on Justus Jorgensen, Knox moved with his family to Eltham in 1949. His developing architectural style was showing the influence of Frank Lloyd Wright, the inspiration of Francis Greenway and Walter Burley Griffin (including the latter's preference for planting indigenous flora) and his admiration for the modernist work of Robin Boyd and (Sir) Roy Grounds. Buildings, landscape and environment began to merge in his work. In landscape design he was particularly impressed by the work of Ellis Stones and Gordon Ford, whose espousal of 'bush gardens' he helped to promote.

Knox's career evolved over three distinct phases. In the first, from the 1940s to the 1960s, he followed Wright in embracing simple building structures. The more sophisticated designs of the second phase, until the late 1970s, incorporated the use of mud, stone and timber. A final phase came in the 1980s, when a Knox house was widely sought.

Although academically unqualified, Knox was a founding member and fellow of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects, and a frequent lecturer on environmental design, architecture, building and landscape. He received an honorary doctorate of architecture from the University of Melbourne in 1984.

The house has *aesthetic and historic significance* as an excellent example (in the Shire context) of the increasing awareness by the Australian public of environmental issues during the 1970s, as evidenced in house and landscape design.

The 1970s were a period of growing awareness of the damage being thrust on the environment through issues such as uranium mining. The ensuing environmental awareness espoused by middle class Australians led to the development across the continent of various defenders of the environment in the form of architects and building designers taking up the cause. Alistair Knox was well known as one of these.

The location of the house (in Mornington Peninsula Shire, and specifically Mt Martha - a relatively isolated and undeveloped natural setting at the time) places it within a historical context of innovative and environmentally sensitive house design in this area. This historical context includes: Walter Burley Griffin's experimental 'Knitlock' housing at Frankston (1920s); the distinctive Modernist designs of Boyd, Grounds and others (1940s – 1960s) whose use of natural finishes and placement of windows and balconies to bring sunlight and air inside have been widely copied; Chancellor & Patrick's response to modern ideas of indoor–outdoor living through open planning in houses at Dromana and Flinders (1950s - 70s); recent examples (post 1980) of environmentally sensitive design including houses by Greg Burgess, a disciple of Knox, at Flinders and Arthurs Seat.

In this context 15 Finlayson Avenue is a significant local example of Knox's contribution to environmental housing, as applied to an area which already had a rich legacy of innovative housing design.

References:

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