

A Place of Sensuous Resort

Buildings of St Kilda and their People

Richard Peterson



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Third Edition, 2012

A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

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Cover Picture

The architect Samuel Jackson and his wife on the verandah of the Wattle House, St Kilda, Melbourne, Australian School, c1860, oil on Canvas, 49 x 66cm.

Courtesy of John Playfoot Fine Art Pty Ltd, St Kilda, Melbourne.

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Dedication | vii |
| Acknowledgements | viii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Buildings | |
| The buildings are numbered in the sequence recommended for the walking, cycling and driving tour. Refer to the map inside the back cover for the locations. | |
| 1. St Kilda Pier & Kiosk, Jacka Boulevard and Pier Road, St Kilda | 5 |
| 2. St Kilda Sea Baths, Jacka Boulevard, St Kilda | 13 |
| 3. Palais Theatre & Triangle, Lower Esplanade (cnr Cavell Street), St Kilda | 19 |
| 4. Luna Park, Lower Esplanade (18 Cavell Street), St Kilda | 27 |
| 5. Scheherazade Restaurant and Coffee Lounge, 99 Acland Street, St Kilda | 35 |
| 6. St Kilda Soldiers' & Sailors' Memorial Hall, 88-90A Acland Street (cnr Albert Street), St Kilda | 39 |
| 7. Joe's (formerly Greasy Joe's Bar & Grill, and formerly Marchetti's Caffé Maximus), 64 Acland Street, cnr Carlisle Street, St Kilda | 43 |
| 8. Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts, 26 Acland Street, St Kilda | 47 |
| 9. Figsby & Fareham, 47-49 Robe Street, St Kilda | 53 |
| 10. Belvedere (The Esplanade), 22 Esplanade, St Kilda | 61 |
| 11. St Leonards Apartments, St Leonards Avenue, St Kilda | 65 |
| 12. The Wimmera , 11 Wimmera Place, St Kilda | 71 |
| 13. Crigan House, 21 Victoria Street, St Kilda | 75 |
| 14. The Espy (Hotel Esplanade), 11 The Esplanade, St Kilda | 81 |
| 15. Summerland Mansions, 17-27 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda | 87 |

A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 16. | The Prince (Prince of Wales Hotel), 29 Fitzroy Street (cnr Acland Street), St Kilda. | 91 |
| 17. | Mirka at Tolarno Hotel, 42 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda | 97 |
| 18. | Brooklawn, Strathmore & The Villa, 77-95 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda | 103 |
| 19. | St Kilda (Terminus) Railway Station & Metropol Apartments, 60 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda | 10 |
| 20. | St Kilda Park Primary School (No 2460), 70 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda | 113 |
| 21. | The Canterbury (flats), 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda West | 117 |
| 22. | Sam Newman House, 270 Canterbury Road, St Kilda West | 121 |
| 23. | Jackson's Manor Backpackers (formerly Wattle House), 53 Jackson Street, St Kilda | 125 |
| 24. | Alliance Française de Melbourne (Eildon, formerly Barham), 51 Grey Street, St Kilda | 131 |
| 25. | Fenagh Cottage, 7 Burnett Street, St Kilda | 135 |
| 26. | Berkley Hall, 11 Princes Street, St Kilda | 141 |
| 27. | Oberwyl (formerly Etloe Hall), 35 Burnett Street (cnr Princess Street), St Kilda | 145 |
| 28. | The Priory (former Boarding House Annexe, The Priory Ladies' School), 61 Alma Road (cnr Odessa Street), St Kilda | 151 |
| 29. | Salvation Army, The Bridge Centre (Cloyne), 12 Chapel Street, St Kilda East | 155 |
| 30. | The Astor Theatre, 1 Chapel Street (cnr Dandenong Road), St Kilda | 159 |
| 31. | Ardoch (formerly Dulquhurn, later Ardoch Education Village), 220-238 Dandenong Road, St Kilda East | |
| 32. | St Kilda Library, 150 Carlisle Street, St Kilda | 171 |
| 33. | St Kilda Town Hall, Brighton Road (cnr Carlisle Street), St Kilda | 175 |
| 34. | St Kilda Primary School (No 1479), 2 Brighton Road, St Kilda | 179 |
| 35. | Los Angeles Court, 50 Brighton Road, Ripponlea | 185 |
| 36. | Unreal Flowers (formerly Brinsmead's Pharmacy), 73 Glen Eira Road, Ripponlea | 189 |

| | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 37. | Ripponlea Railway Station (formerly Glen Eira Road Railway Station), 193 Glen Eira Road, Ripponlea | 193 |
| 38. | Tintara, 20 Lyndon Street (cnr Fuller Road & Victoria Avenue), Ripponlea | 197 |
| 39. | Elsternwick Hotel, 259 Brighton Road (cnr 173 Glen Huntly Road), Elwood | 201 |
| 40. | Elwood House, 28, 30 & 30A Vautier Street, Elwood | 205 |
| 41. | Surrey Court, 71 Ormond Road, Elwood | 209 |
| 42. | Woy Woy, 77 Marine Parade, St Kilda | 213 |
| 43. | Edgewater Towers, 12 Marine Parade, St Kilda | 219 |
| 44. | Carmel Court (formerly Hofwyl House Academy), 188C-E Barkly Street, St Kilda | 225 |
| 45. | De Beer House, 71 Barkly Street, St Kilda | 229 |
| 46. | Tatts Group (former Gas Valve House), 615 St Kilda Road (cnr Raleigh Street), Melbourne | 233 |
| 46. | Rooming House Plus (former John Batman Motor Inn), 69 Queens Road (cnr Lorne Street), Melbourne | 235 |
| 47. | Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (formerly Ulimaroa), 630 St Kilda Road, Melbourne | 243 |
| | Illustrations | 251 |
| | Appendix 1: The Architects | 255 |
| | Appendix 2: The People | 257 |
| | Glossary | 259 |
| | Map | 269 |

Dedication

The 2005 edition is for Darrell, who walked, drove and typed most of it.

Richard Peterson Architect
A Place of Sensuous Resort
Third Edition 2012

Acknowledgements

This book was conceived as an e-book located on our web site www.skhs.org.au and as work in progress: an ongoing history, subject to changes resulting from contributions from readers. However, a small number of hard copies were published for libraries and non-users of cyberspace. The City of Port Phillip through its Cultural Development Fund has assisted publication of this title. Many thanks go to the steering committee from the St Kilda Historical Society, particularly Peter Johnson and volunteer Chris Stoneman.

The author's reasons for selections of buildings in this volume included their representation of architectural styles and building types, their association with significant persons or events, their diverse locations across St Kilda and for their stories. Many thanks go to David Brand, councillor of the City of Port Phillip, who assisted in the choice of our final forty-eight buildings, and who has made an enormous contribution to the preservation of cultural heritage in St Kilda.

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Richard Peterson Architect
A Place of Sensuous Resort
Third Edition 2012

Illustrations

| Page | Source |
|-------------|---|
| 5 | National Trust, File No 5471 |
| 7 | Port Phillip City Collection |
| 9 | National Trust, File No 5471 |
| 10 | Lana Wells, <i>Sunny Memories. Australiana at the Seaside</i> , Greenhouse Publications, Richmond 1982, p 66. |
| 13 | Lana Wells, <i>Sunny Memories. Australiana at the Seaside</i> , Greenhouse Publications, Richmond 1982, p 66. |
| 14 | <i>Bayside Reflections</i> , ScreenSound Australia |
| 15 | Port Phillip City Collection |
| 16 | Richard Peterson |
| 19 | Port Phillip City Collection |
| 20 | Robin Boyd, <i>Victorian Modern</i> , Architectural Students' Society of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects, Melbourne 1947, p 25. |
| 21, top | National Trust of Australia (Victoria), File No 4722 |
| 21, bottom | National Trust of Australia (Victoria), File No 4722 |
| 22 | Port Phillip City Collection |
| 25 | Richard Peterson |
| 28 | Richard Peterson Collection, postcard |
| 29 | Port Phillip City Collection |
| 31, top | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 31, bottom | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 35, top | John Hulskamp |
| 35, bottom | John Hulskamp |
| 39 | Richard Peterson |
| 47 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 49 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 51 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 53 | John Hulskamp |
| 54, left | Burke, Janine, <i>The Eye of the Beholder. Albert Tucker's Photographs</i> , Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen 1998, pp 26, 55-57. |
| 54, right | Burke, Janine, <i>The Eye of the Beholder. Albert Tucker's Photographs</i> , Heide Museum of Modern Art, Bulleen 1998, pp 26, 55-57. |
| 56 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) file, Urban Spaces Pty Ltd |
| 61 | Cooper, J B, <i>The History of St Kilda: From Its First Settlement to a City and After, 1840-1930</i> , Vols 1 & 2, Printers Proprietary Limited, Melbourne 1931. |
| 62 | Richard Peterson |
| 65 | Richard Peterson |
| 67 | Katsalidis Pty Ltd Architects |
| 71 | John Hulskamp |
| 75 | <i>Architecture Australia</i> , May 1989, pp 62 & 63 |
| 76 | John Hulskamp |
| 78 | <i>Architecture Australia</i> , May 1989, pp 62 & 63 |
| 81 | St Kilda Historical Society Collection |
| 84 | John Hulskamp |
| 85 | City of Port Phillip Planning Department |

| | |
|-------------|--|
| 87 | "Lauderdale," <i>Victoria's Representative Men at Home: Punch's Illustrated Interviews</i> , c1903. |
| 88 | Richard Peterson |
| 92, top | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 92, bottom | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 93 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 98 | Richard Peterson |
| 100 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 104 | Richard Peterson |
| 108, top | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 108, bottom | City of Port Phillip Collection |
| 109 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 110 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 113 | Richard Peterson |
| 118 | Richard Peterson |
| 121 | Richard Peterson |
| 125 | By permission, John Playfoot Fine Art Pty Ltd. |
| 127 | State Library of Victoria |
| 128 | John Hulskamp |
| 132 | Richard Peterson |
| 135 | Richard Peterson |
| 136 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 137 | Heritage Victoria |
| 145 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 146 | Helen Topliss, <i>Tom Roberts: 1856-1931. A Catalogue Raisonné</i> , 2 Vols, OUP, Melbourne 1985. |
| 147 | Butler, Roger, <i>The Prints of Margaret Preston. A Catalogue Raisonné</i> , Australian National Gallery, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1987. |
| 148 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria). |
| 149 | John Hulskamp |
| ? | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 151 | Richard Peterson |
| 155 | Richard Peterson |
| 159 | Richard Peterson |
| 161 | Daniel Catrice, 'Cinemas in Melbourne, 1896-1942,' Vol 2, pp 90-94. |
| 165 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 167 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 168 | Richard Peterson |
| 171 | Dr Enrico Taglietti |
| 172 | Richard Peterson |
| 175 | Richard Peterson |
| 179 | Richard Peterson |
| 187 | Richard Peterson |
| 189 | Richard Peterson |
| 193 | Richard Peterson |
| 194 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 195 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 201 | John Hulskamp |
| 205 | John Hulskamp |
| 209 | John Hulskamp |

A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

| | |
|-----|---|
| 213 | Richard Peterson |
| 221 | Richard Peterson |
| 235 | Richard Peterson |
| 241 | Richard Peterson |
| 244 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 245 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) |
| 247 | Richard Peterson |
| 249 | National Trust of Australia (Victoria) file, Norman Day Pty Ltd |

Note

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Richard Peterson Architect
A Place of Sensuous Resort
Third Edition 2012

Introduction

From its earliest settlement, St Kilda has been Melbourne's place of sensuous resort – somewhere to escape to, for pleasure or for its pleasant dormitory lifestyle whilst commuting; but sufficiently distant from the noisy, dusty, polluted city. St Kilda's recreational beaches and elevated ground, with sea views, romantic sunsets and bracing sea breezes, lay above the low unhealthy marshland of Albert Park and the southern Yarra bank.

It was always a place of hospitality: for holidays, family days out to the seaside, or racy nocturnal entertainment. In St Kilda the arts flourished: music, movies, theatre, drag and art galleries and it was the home of the Melbourne Hunt. The waterfront funfairs, dancehalls, piers and gardens have for over a century been Melbourne's pleasure resort.

Beyond the city and Newtown (South Fitzroy), from earliest rather exclusive settlement, there was denser development in St Kilda than in any other suburb: the earliest terraced houses, earliest and numerous self-contained flats, residential hotels, mansions converted into rooming houses, the earliest motor hotel and most recently, town houses. A sequence of uses, an array of urban lifestyles from seedy to sophisticated, sometimes evolving over the life of a single building. Mansions became guesthouses or apartments, or private hotels, then art galleries or cafés. Now a motor hotel has become a rooming house. Rough boozers became smart, then rough again, then even smarter. Its architectural styles remain a cornucopia, particularly of the twentieth century: the earliest Modernism, the most outrageous Post-Modernism and the fruits of hard-fought local heritage warfare.

There has been in St Kilda, acceptance and openness to sensuous bohemian behaviour from homosexuals, prostitutes, artists, the armed forces, rock 'n' rollers, Aborigines and other minorities, and for refugees, from which its street culture remains enriched.

The 48 buildings and their occupants discussed in this book were selected because they are interesting and significant in themselves, but the brief suggested that they be also representative of aspects of themes they suggest; as pegs on which to hang physical evidence of whole ranges of related building types and their stories, which would otherwise go unmentioned.

For instance, the chapter on Edgewater Towers that was included as representative of the 1950s apartment blocks, of eastern European émigré architects, as well as of the Johnson family of architects, three entirely different topics that reveal surprising links. Indeed, analysis of the material **in** the book has continued to reveal a multiplicity of surprising cross-references, connections and links, throughout the book. Throughout the text, cross-references are indicated by their chapter number bracketed in **bold**.

There has, I confess, been a particular interest here in the works of significant architects and a list of these is attached. Some of the subjects of other recent books, such as the George Hotel and the National Theatre, have been deliberately excluded from this book.

The area trawled here has been within the former City of St Kilda, embracing St Kilda West, St Kilda, Elwood, part of St Kilda East, part of Balaclava and that curious little suburb called Melbourne that is actually within the City of Port Phillip. A map has been compiled to assist in driving, cycling and walking routes, which includes all forty-eight buildings.

Living

Surviving evidence of the earliest settlement by the wealthy in St Kilda when it was Melbourne's most desirable suburb, is represented here by Wattle House (1850, **23**), and of the post-Gold Rush by: Berkley Hall (1854, **26**), Elwood House (1854-55, **40**), Fenagh (1855, **25**) and Oberwyl (1856, **27**). Even grander houses from the later nineteenth century include: Linden (1871, **8**), Eildon (1871, **24**), the Brooklawn group (1880, **18**), Cloyne (1887, **29**) and Ulimaroa (1889, **48**).

The twentieth century before World War II produced lower-scale houses in St Kilda, but not less interesting for that: De Beer house (1910, **45**), Tintara (1923, **38**) and the Los Angeles Court group (1926-38, **35**). Then, for fifty years, virtually no single houses were built in St Kilda until those of the last twenty years, represented here by 21 Victoria Street (1988-89, **13**) and the Sam Newman house (2000, **22**). These were the homebases of such inimitable identities as those listed in **Appendix 2**.

Multi-unit development came as early to St Kilda as anywhere in Melbourne. The earliest terrace is Elwood House in 1854-55 (**40**) and an interesting later example is Figsby and Fareham (1867, **9**). Rooming houses gradually evolved into self-contained flats: The Canterbury (1914, **21**), is the first complete example, followed by: Wimmera (1917, **12**), Summerland (1920-21, **15**) and Ardoch (1924-, **31**); each representing entirely different configurations in the Arts-and-Crafts style. Belvedere, now confusingly mis-named The Esplanade (1929, **10**), here represents the Californian glamour of the Spanish Mission style, the highly romantic Old English manner at Surrey Court (1933, **41**) and the first breath of Modernism at Woy Woy (1935-36, **42**). Edgewater Towers (1959-60, **43**) represents the earliest high-rise waterfront apartments and the John Batman Motor Inn (1961-62, **46**), the arrival of motels with their accommodation of the motorcar within the hotel and serviced flats market. St Leonards Apartments (1995-96, **11**) stands here for the most recent phase of multi-unit development, which is of such high degree of architectural innovation and quality.

St Kilda is now the suburb with the highest density of population in Melbourne, with 5,700 residents per sq km, and has the fourth highest density in Australia (after Coogee, Bronte and Bondi in Sydney, each with 6,700 residents per sq km). St Kilda has had high density living for at least 75 years, and 'attracts those people... who are prepared to trade off space for access to everything they consider more important to them, such as trams (not trains), walkable neighbourhoods, nightlife and a fascinating social history.'¹

Many schools, shops, municipal buildings, public utilities and public transport served such populous accommodation. Four very early schools, including Denominational, National and Common schools were partly funded by the government to open in St Kilda before the founding of the Education Department in 1873, but none now exist. Other early small private schools thrived: at Wattle House (1858, 1863, or 1867-1878), **23**), Hofwyl House (1862-C20, **44**), Oberwyl (1867-1931, **27**) and the Priory Collegiate Academy (1872-, **28**) and St Michael's (**9**, **30**, 1895-). Three government schools are included here, each significant in the story of St Kilda: Brighton Road (1875, **34**), St Kilda Park (1879, **20**) and Ardoch (1977-92, **31**).

Public transport opened St Kilda up to a much more diverse commuting and day-tripping public, initially through St Kilda Railway Station (1856-57, **19**) and to settle in the suburban villa subdivisions exemplified at Ripponlea (1911-13, **37**). The rare surviving Gas Valve House offers evidence of the installation of reticulated utilities (1877, **47**), the fine former Brinsmead's Pharmacy (1918, **36**) evokes retail St Kilda of 90 years ago and the Town Hall represents a gamut of municipal attitudes and initiatives (1887-1994, **33**).

Pleasure

For most of us, St Kilda means good times, pleasure taken at the seaside, in music, dancing, cafés and street life; at theatre, movies and in artworks seen and experienced and earlier, it also meant the call of 'tally-ho' whilst hunting cross-country to hounds. Here, the range of St Kilda's boundless hospitality is expressed in

¹ Bernadette George, social planner (**22**), *Planning News*, vol 33, no 3, April 2007, pp 6 & 7.

the diverse stories of its hotels and cafes: earliest at the Elsternwick (1854-55, **39**), then the Espy (1877-78, **14**), the Prince (1937, **16**), Sheherazade (1958, **5**), the John Batman (1961-62, **46**), Tolarno (1965, **17**) and representing the threshold of the current vibrant phase: Caffé Maximus (1988, **7**). The tang and frolic of seaside leisure is tangible in the stories of the Sea Baths (1860, **2**), the pier and its kiosk (1905, **1**) and in iconic Luna Park (1911-12, **4**).

Cinema and theatre in St Kilda are initially represented by the Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Hall (the former Memorial Cinema, 1923, **6**), gloriously in the Palais (1926, **3**) and the Astor (1935-36, **30**). St Kilda's rich connection with fine art began with the art taught and hung at Oberwyl (possibly from 1867, but at least from 1885-92), continued as a subject for artists (Luna Park from as early as 1919, but particularly from 1940), as a site for studios, exemplified here by Tucker and Hester's studio at Figsby (1944-46, **9**), Mirka Mora's at Tolarno (**17**) and elsewhere, from 1965-78 and from 1981-90s. Art galleries are represented by Tolarno (1965-) and Linden (1984-, **8**) and by the municipal art collection (Town Hall, **33**).

Acceptance

For 80 years, St Kilda has been accepting minorities: not only the vagaries of artists, but of homosexuals (at the Prince possibly from 1937, **16**) but of Eastern European and Jewish immigrants and refugees, here shown at Linden (1870, **8**), Sheherazade (1958, **5**) and Tolarno (1965, **17**).

History of history

The place of the community reflection, heritage studies, published histories, historical society, private Johnsonian research.

Conclusion

For at least 150 years, St Kilda has been the place where Melburnians got away to escape the pressure and pollution of the city, for pleasure, leisure and a raffish, stylish lifestyle. **In the 1970s, even the St Kilda Football Club had a name for its dyed-blonde headed party-boys.** It's been a sensuous, bohemian, risqué resort, where blind eyes were turned and difference tolerated, if not celebrated; where music, film, theatre and art were joyously made and shown, where a gamut of marvellous Melbourne identities flourished and where evolutionary change is constant. Almost incidentally, it also reveals to the strolling *flaneur*, a gazetteer of architectural style and styles, particularly from the twentieth century.

The Second Edition

The first edition was published at short notice at a busy time, without a close edit. There were many typos, and some embarrassing errors. The Second Edition has been entirely re-written, updated to include the events of the past four years, incorporating material until April 2008 and is over 70% larger. For some of the chapters, particularly The Palais Theatre, which I take to include its entire Triangle Site (**3**), and of Tolarno (**17**), this additional content has been extensive; but chapters on St Kilda Pier & Kiosk (**1**) and the Prince (**16**) amongst others, have been enlarged and all chapters have some additional material. The Glossary has been greatly expanded and recast to more closely reflect the technical terms actually included in the text.

I do welcome further material known to readers and corrections to errors of fact and I thank those readers who have kindly contributed material for this edition. The sum of historic evidence is never finite, there is always more to discover about our past.

Since the first edition, the major loss was the destruction of the St Kilda Pier Kiosk by arson, mitigated by its reconstruction in replica. But the three great and unexpected gifts to the people of St Kilda and of Melbourne have been the imaginative purchase of the Astor Theatre (30) by St Michael's Grammar School (9), the equally courageous purchase and the respectful securing the future of Eildon by the Alliance Française de Melbourne (24) and the major investment in Tolarno by its long-term leaseholder to also secure its future, all during 2007. In the same year, there was major investment in the St Kilda Town Hall (33) by the Port Phillip City Council to accommodate its entire staff.

The Current Third Edition

Since April 2008, I have continued to add material as it has become available and as news broke and made history, so that the present text is as far as I am aware, current.

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Third Edition 2012