Place name:	RC Church and School of Our Lady of the Nativity
Address:	31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie
Place typology:	School / church
Construction date range:	1957 (school); 1967 (church)
Architectural style:	Post-War Modernist
Assessment:	Built Heritage Pty Ltd, May 2022
Recommendation:	To be included in the schedule to the heritage overlay

Photos of place:





Photographs by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, May 2022.

Statement of Significance:

What is significant?

31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie, comprises two buildings within a broader Roman Catholic church and school complex: the front portion of the single-storey brick parish school, designed by Smith & Tracey in 1957 and extended in 1962, and the adjacent freestanding brick church designed by S J Moran in 1967.

The significant features of the buildings include:

- The fan-shaped plan, canted façade, fin-like corner piers, vaulted roofline and spire of the church nave
- The concave textured brick wall of the church foyer and its opening with projecting concrete surround
- The stained glass windows to the church nave and *dalle de verre* window (a method of stained glass) to the front foyer
- The offset gabled roofline of the parish school and the front window wall with posted verandah
- The cruciform tower of the school, with expressed structural frame, brick header infill and Celtic cross

How is it significant?

31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie, is of local architectural and aesthetic significance to the City of Moonee Valley.

Why is it significant?

31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie, is aesthetically significant as two different but complementary manifestations of post-war modernism. The school building demonstrates the stark minimalist approach typical of the late 1950s, with its window wall and low roofline (expressed here as an asymmetrical gable with projecting full-width verandah), while the cruciform tower, with expressed structure and decorative brick infill, forms a highly distinctive and eye-catching feature above the entry. The adjacent church is notable for its unusual plan form, extruded into a canted façade with fin-like piers, enlivened by an entry foyer with concave feature wall of textured brick and a window with projecting surround and *dalle de verre* glass. Both buildings remain as striking elements in the streetscape. (Criterion E).

31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie, is architecturally significant as a pair of fine and substantially intact architect-designed buildings that are excellent post-war examples of their respective types. The original school building, with its low gabled roofline and window wall, demonstrates the more progressive approach to the design of school buildings in the 1950s while the adjacent church, erected a decade later, provides evidence of the radical changes in Roman Catholic church design following the Second Vatican Council, most clearly articulated in its distinctive fan-shaped nave. (Criterion F).

Description:

The Fawkner Street frontage of the RC Church and School of Our Lady of the Nativity comprises several buildings in a row: the original school/chapel building (with later additions to the north and east sides), the church, the presbytery and the kindergarten. Only the church and the original portion of the school are described here; the other school buildings, presbytery and kindergarten are not considered to reach the threshold for local heritage significance.

The front part of the parish school, at 31 Fawkner Street, is a single-storey brick building on an elongated rectangular plan, comprising the 1957 building to the south and the 1962 addition to the north. The original part has an offset gabled roof and simple façade divided into nine bays, each containing multi-paned steel-framed windows with a narrow brick spandrel. The roof projects to the street to form a verandah, supported on metal posts that correspond to the nine bays. At the north end, between wing walls of red and cream brick, is a recessed entry foyer with glazed doors, marked by a tower on a cross-shaped plan with expressed metal frame and an infill of cream-coloured header bricks in a decorative pattern, surmounted by a Celtic cross. The 1962 addition, extending north, is a cream brick building with low roofline, clerestory windows and an off-centre recessed entrance that opens onto a flat-roofed porch with brick piers.

The parish school building has been altered by rendering of face brickwork to the façade spandrels and south wall (which now also incorporates a mosaic mural), replacement of windows and alterations to the entry including a new skillion roof, a mosaic tiled portal, and a trabeated frame linked to the base of the tower. At the top of the tower is an empty space that may have once contained a statue of the Virgin Mary (as indicated on the working drawings).

The church, at 33 Fawkner Street, is a post-war modernist brick building laid out on a distinctive fan-shaped plan, formed by a half-round apse at the rear (not visible from the street) from which radiates a cluster of wedge-shaped elements that define the nave. Each wedge has a separate skillion roof, creating a low hipped roofline akin to a vaulted dome. The angular geometry is reflected in the canted elevation of the double-height nave, which has fin-like concrete piers at each junction, panelled fascias and rows of tall rectangular windows at each level with stained glass panels. Projecting to the street is a single-storey flat-roofed entry foyer, dominated by a concave feature wall of textured brickwork that contains a central window with projecting rendered surround and *dalle de verre* window. This is flanked on the north side by an open entry canopy, and to the south by a sacristy wing with narrow window bays incorporating textured brick spandrels.

History:

Contextual History

City of Moonee Valley occupies part of the Traditional lands of the Wurundjeri-willam clan of the Woi-wurrung people. Many sites in the area now known as City of Moonee Valley show evidence of Woi-wurrung activities and spiritual connections. Fish were trapped in the rivers and creeks, stone was quarried from the river edges, murnong daisy was collected and kangaroos hunted across grassland areas, and bark was harvested from trees in the river valleys. The close relationship between the Woi-wurrung peoples and the land, water, animals and plants, continues to this day (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.29).

The first European to explore the area now known as Moonee Valley was a surveyor, Charles Grimes in 1803. In 1836, settlers moving from Van Diemens Land crossed the area in the hope of finding empty, cheap and plentiful land for sheep. By 1842, surveyors had created the first map of the Parish of Doutta Galla and then Woi-wurrung lands were offered for sale by the British Crown to their subjects. By 1860, the entire parish was sold (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.32-33).

Early development of the area began with the goldrush period of the 1850s which saw Mount Alexander Road used as a thoroughfare to the diggings with over 30,000 people estimated as moving along the dirt road each week. Businesses and shops sprang up providing sustenance, transport and accommodation to service the passing gold rush trade. Some very early wayside hotels and shops still survive from this period (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p. 51-54). After the heady days of the goldrush, the 1860s saw Essendon, Ascot Vale, Moonee Ponds and Flemington develop into permanent townships. The development of railways by private companies gave huge impetus to suburban development of the area with the opening of the Essendon railway in 1860. The government purchased the line in 1868. Suburban trains terminated at Essendon and it wasn't until 1889 that Ascot Vale, Moonee Ponds and Newmarket stations were completed. By 1893 stations opened at Strathmore and Pascoe Vale and in 1922 Glenbervie Station opened. The railways provided an enormous boost to residential development along the line and those who had previously moved to areas without trains, now clamoured for them (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.59).

By the 1880s Essendon had become a Borough and by 1891 had a population of 14,411. Many subdivisions occurred during the land boom of the 1880s and many failed to eventuate due to the depression of the 1890s. In the interwar period a boom in subdivision and residential infill occurred in Travancore, Essendon, Ascot Vale, Strathmore and Moonee Ponds, which was focused on new transport routes along the tram lines, first established to Essendon in 1905. In 1919 the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board was formed and lines were extended and improved. The tram lines saw development occur either side of Maribyrnong Road, further along Mt Alexander Road, Buckley Street and Keilor Road (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p. 65-68, p.115).

Education was an important consideration in the development of the municipality, with schools having been established in Essendon and Flemington in the 1850s. The development of State schools in the area reflects the major phases of education and includes a number of 'firsts'; the first non-denominational school in Victoria was set up in Essendon in

1850, the first purpose-built infants school in the state was set up in 1902, and Essendon High School was the first purpose-built high school in the Melbourne metropolitan area. Denominational schools were also set up in the area in the early 1850s, with more private schools established during the boom period of the 1880s. Residents wanted a better life than the one most had left behind in Britain, including a good education for their children (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.157-161).

In the three decades after the Second World War, Melbourne's suburbs ballooned outward to cater for post-war migration, the baby boom, an increasing need for new housing, and a more car-centred economy. Areas to the north of Essendon had been open paddocks in 1945, but by 1950 the Shire of Keilor found themselves with a developing suburb with no name. It was later called Niddrie. Similarly, Airport West was developing quickly with houses being built before the roads. By 1964 it was claimed that Airport West had the cheapest cream brick veneers in Melbourne (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.120-121). Many houses in these post-war areas were austere weatherboard or brick veneer bungalows, with a few scattered architect-designed or project homes on new blocks, particularly along the Boulevard in Aberfeldie. These post-war housing areas were car-centred communities located close to industry along Keilor Road, Matthews Avenue around Essendon Airport and East Keilor. By 1960 Airport West had its first hotel, the famous Skyways Hotel and then in the 1970s the first shopping centre, owned by Westfield, was begun (heritage ALLIANCE, G*ap Heritage Study*, 2005: p.28-30).

Post-war housing pressure also saw a huge investment by the Housing Commission of Victoria who developed 150 bungalows in concrete, weatherboard and brick in Aberfeldie. They then began an ambitious estate of houses and flats on a 77 acre site at Ascot Vale in 1949. These low-rise walk-up flats eventually gave rise to the high-rise flats of Flemington which opened in June 1965 (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.123).

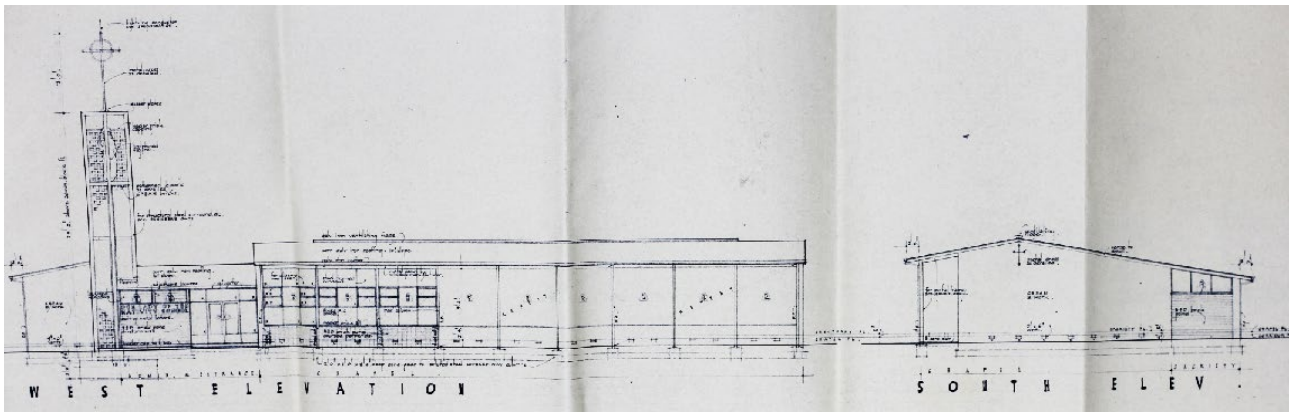
Many post-war migrants bought or built houses in the outer areas of the municipality, close to employment and industry and where new, cheaper housing was readily available. These developments and public housing in Aberfeldie, Ascot Vale and Flemington have had a long-lasting effect on the nature of the Moonee Valley community which today is one of the most diverse and vibrant in Melbourne (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.124).

Place History

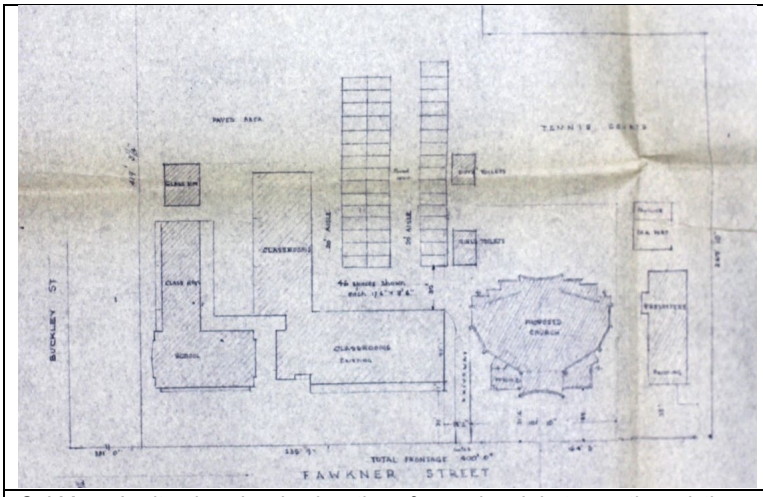
The Roman Catholic Church and School of Our Lady of the Nativity at 31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie, was developed from the late 1940s, with the present complex dominated by the school building (1957) and new church (1967)

A formalised Roman Catholic presence in West Essendon dates back as far as 1945, when *Clydebank*, a large Victorian mansion on the west side of Vida Avenue, was taken over by a religious order, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, who operated it as a women's retreat known as the Ave Maria Retreat House. Three years later, it was proposed to erect a building on the property's rear frontage, fronting Fawkner Street, for use as a combined church and parish school. As a separate parish had not yet been created, the scheme fell under the jurisdiction of the Parish of St Therese, Essendon, and the working drawings for the new building cite St Therese's parish priest, Reverend Father T J Little, as the client of record. The drawings, prepared leading Roman Catholics architects O'Connor & Brophy, proposed a single-storey brick building on an L-shaped plan, containing an elongated space that had a sanctuary at one end (for Sunday worship) and could be partitioned into classrooms for teaching during the week. However, the project did not proceed at that time.

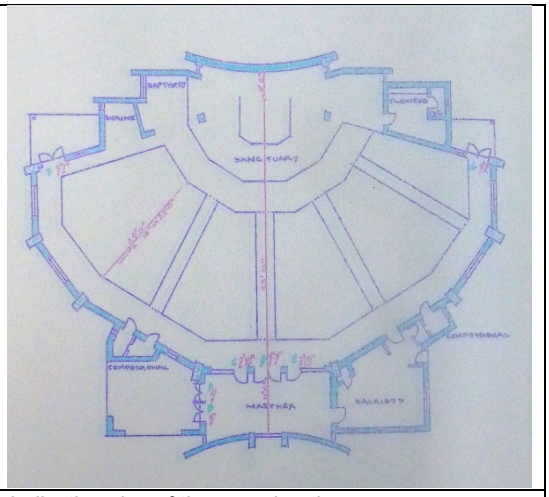
Further development was spurred in late 1956 by the creation of the new Parish of West Essendon, with Reverend Father J R Neal, late curate of Holy Trinity, Hampton, as parish priest (*Age*, 15 December 1956, p.10). The first mass took place that Christmas, held in the stables at the rear of the Ave Maria Retreat House, which inspired the name Our Lady of the Nativity. The following year, Neal was succeeded by Reverend J P Pearce who commissioned a new scheme for a combined church and school building on Fawkner Street.



Excerpt of working drawing showing west and south elevations of the parish school (Smith & Tracey, 1957)
Source: Public Building files No 11287, Public Record Office Victoria, North Melbourne.



S J Moran's site plan showing location of new church between the existing school and presbytery. Source: PB File 15062, PROV.



Indicative plan of the new church.
Source: PB File 15062, PROV.

The new building was designed by Smith & Tracey, another Roman Catholic firm, one of whose principals, Dan Tracey, was himself a resident of Essendon West. Working drawings, dated September 1957, depict a single-storey building on an L-shaped plan: the front wing contained a large chapel-like space that could be adapted for both Sunday worship and weekday teaching, while the rear wing contained four more classrooms. The first wedding in the new chapel was held in March 1959 (*Age*, 31 February 1959, p.6).

During the 1960s, facilities expanded under the Reverend Father James B Wall, former chaplain at Parade College in East Melbourne, who became parish priest in 1961 (*Paradian*, December 1961, p.16). This began with construction of a new presbytery at the south end of the Fawkner Street frontage, and an addition to the school building, providing an assembly hall and more classrooms, officially opened and blessed by the Archbishop of Melbourne, the Most Reverend Dr J D Simons, in June 1962 (*Essendon Gazette*, 13 June 1962).

Five years later, plans for a new purpose-built church were prepared by Stanislaus Joseph "Stan" Moran (1902-1986), another prolific Roman Catholic architect. At the time, Moran was a resident of Balwyn North and a parishioner of St Bede's Church (for which he designed the parish school in 1952 and a new church in 1961), but he had previously lived for many years in Travancore, where he designed a house for his parents in 1924. Moran's (undated) working drawings for the Our Lady of the Nativity depict a brick structure on a fan-shaped plan, reflecting the recent reforms of Vatican II. The foundation stone was laid on 29 October 1967 by the Most Reverend James R Knox, who had succeeded Dr Simonds as Archbishop of Melbourne. The church, erected by builder Michael Arbon, was evidently completed early the following year. The first wedding to be held there took place in September 1968, when local resident Margaret Flahavin married Kevin Marshall, late of Paynesville (*Age*, 2 September 1968, p.12).

Some relatively minor additions have since been made to the complex, including a single storey extension to the school hall (architect unknown, 1971), an addition to the church (Smith & Tracey, 1981) and a new staff room and office (Ward Simpson, 1983-84) linking the two earlier school buildings of 1957 and 1962. The original classroom wing, to the rear of the tower, was demolished in 2009 for construction of the new Greccio Learning Centre.

Sources:

Primary Sources

PJ OConnor & Brophy, "New church school, Essendon", working drawings, dated 30 July 1946.
Public Building File No PB 9,289, Box 1078, VPRS 7882/P1. PROV, North Melbourne.

Smith & Tracey, "Proposed church school at Fawkner Street, West Essendon", working drawings, dated July 1957.
Public Building File No PB 11,287, Box 1317, VPRS 7882/P1. PROV, North Melbourne.

S J Moran, "Church of Our Lady of the Nativity, Fawkner Street, West Essendon", working drawings, undated.
Public Building File No PB 15,062, Box 1816, VPRS 7882/P1. PROV, North Melbourne.

Secondary Sources

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, "Smith & Tracey", *Dictionary of Unsung Architects*, <www.builtheritage.com.au>

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, research file on Stanislaus Moran.

R.W. Chalmers, *The Annals of Essendon.* Vol 2, 1925-1962. (Essendon: Essendon Historical Society, 1998).

R.W. Chalmers, *The Annals of Essendon.* Vol 3, 1963-1985. (Essendon: Essendon Historical Society, 2005).

R.W. Chalmers, *The Annals of Essendon.* Vol 4, 1986-2000. (Essendon: Essendon Historical Society, 2005).

Thematic Context:

City of Moonee Valley Thematic Environmental History, 2012

8.0 Building community life

8.1 Maintaining spiritual life

Comparative Analysis:

The following is a list of major Roman Catholic churches in the City of Moonee Valley:

- St Mary Immaculate Conception, 123 St Leonards Street, Ascot Vale (1913) – *existing HO400*
- St Brendan, 89-103 Wellington Street, Flemington (1923) – *existing HO125*
- St Theresa, 48a Lincoln Road, Essendon (1934) – *existing HO417*
- St Monica, 820 Mount Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds (1934) – *existing HO86 (also VHR H1217)*
- St Vincent de Paul, 92-108 Woodland Street, Strathmore (1959) – *existing HO348 (church on corner only)*
- St John Bosco, 29 Muriel Street, Niddrie (1966) – *identified in previous study but no HO*
- St Christopher, 34 Roberts Road, Airport West (1969) – *existing HO344*
- St Peter the Apostle, 2a Parkside Avenue, Keilor East (1970) – *much altered*
- Polish Marian Shrine, 10 Aberfeldie Street, Aberfeldie (1973)
- St Martin de Porres, 158 Military Road, Avondale Heights (1987) – *identified in previous study but no HO*

Evidence of Roman Catholic presence in the City of Moonee Valley is demonstrably well represented on the HO schedule, although only two post-war churches are currently protected despite additional ones identified in heritage reviews. It is worth noting that both of these examples are located in parts of the study area that, like Aberfeldie, underwent their most significant phase of expansion in the post-war era.

Virtually all of the churches listed above have parish schools on the same site, as well as related buildings such as presbyteries, kindergartens, halls or even a former cloistered residence. In cases where a HO has been applied, its extent can vary. At Ascot Vale (HO400) and Flemington (HO417), the overlay covers the entire site, thus protecting all of the significant pre-war fabric (ie, church, school, presbytery). At Moonee Ponds, the pre-war church (HO86), the pre-war presbytery (HO135) and pre-war parish school (HO136) have been given separate heritage overlays because the latter two building occupy separate sites at the rear, on the other side of Robinson Road. With the other listed examples at

Essendon, Strathmore and Airport West, the heritage overlay has been applied only to the church itself, excluding the adjacent parish school buildings and any other associated structures.

The Church and School of Our Lady of the Nativity is notable at the local level as an example of a post-war Roman Catholic complex where the school building and church are each of architectural interest in their own right, as well as having historic cohesion as part of the post-war expansion of a parish that was only established in 1956.

Post-war ecclesiastical architecture in the City of Moonee Valley:

To set the church in a clearer architectural context, the subset of comparators can be expanded to consider the various local churches that were built by Protestant denominations in the post-war period.

- Buckley Park Methodist Church, 41-43 Nimmo Street, Essendon (Drayton & Coleman, 1959) – *church converted for residential use; building and adjacent presbytery both altered beyond recognition*
- Strathmore Methodist Church, 247 Napier Street, Strathmore (Bates, Smart & McCutcheon, 1959) – *demolished*
- Glenbervie Baptist Church, 172 Napier Street, Essendon (1961) – *residential conversion; much altered*
- St James Presbyterian Church, 47 Macey Avenue, Avondale Heights (1960) – *much altered; now YMCA*
- St Aidan's Anglican Church, 18-24 Williamson Avenue, Strathmore (Philip Garside, 1960-61) – *existing HO347*
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church, 91 Buckley Street, Moonee Ponds (1961-66) – *identified in previous study; no HO*
- Aberfeldie Baptist Church, 5 Price Street, Essendon West (Keith Reid, 1964) – *identified in previous study; no HO*
- St Mark's Anglican Church, 138 Hoffmans Road, Niddrie (1969) – *demolished*

Compared to their Roman Catholic counterparts, post-war Protestant churches in the City of Moonee Valley have seen a higher rate of closure and redevelopment. The Anglican church in Niddrie and Methodist church in Strathmore have both been demolished, while those that have been deconsecrated and subject to adaptive re-use (typically involving extensive alteration) include the Buckley Park Methodist Church, Glenbervie Baptist Church and St James Presbyterian Church. Only two post-war Protestant churches are currently included on the heritage overlay schedule, with a third that was identified in a heritage study but has not yet been gazetted with an overlay.

Surviving post-war churches in the study area, regardless of denomination, vary in form and style. Most examples tend to be traditional in design, harking back to historical precedents in their rectilinear naves, gabled roofs and symmetrical facades with tall windows. This is most evident in in the staunchly conservative Roman Catholic churches at Strathmore (1959), Niddrie (1966) and Avondale Heights (1987), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Moonee Ponds (1961-1966) and the Polish Marian Shrine in Aberfeldie (1973). The Baptist church at Aberfeldie demonstrates a rather more progressive interpretation of the traditional forms, while the Anglican church at Strathmore is even more explicitly contemporary, with its rectilinear nave enlivened by an asymmetrical gable and breeze block screen, and a fashionably butterfly-roofed foyer with feature slate cladding. Post-war churches characterised by non-rectilinear planning, rather than a rectilinear nave, are a discrete sub-theme of the later 1960s and, invariably, are Roman Catholic churches of the post-Vatican 2 era (ie, responding to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council of 1962-65). In the City of Moonee Valley, only two examples have been identified: the Church of Our Lady of the Nativity in Aberfeldie, and the slightly later church of St Christopher in Airport West, with the latter already individually listed as HO344.

RC Church of St Christopher, 34 Roberts Road, Airport West (1969) Designed by architect Max Chester, this building has much in common with its earlier counterpart in Aberfeldie, having a similarly canted fan-shaped plan with projecting front porch, dark-coloured face brickwork and a distinctive vaulted roofline with a Latin cross.	

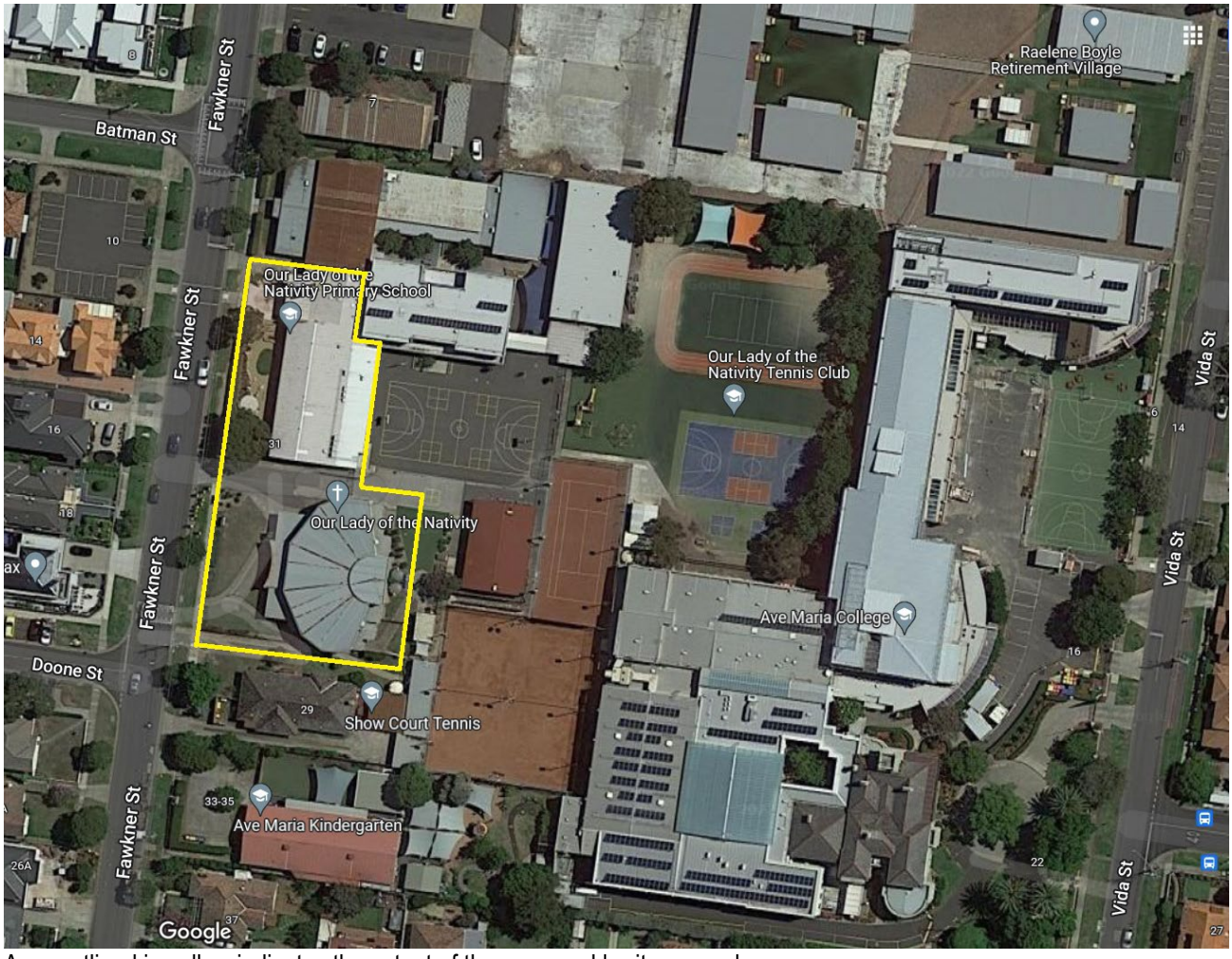
Recommendation:

That the two buildings at 31-33 Fawkner Street, Aberfeldie, be included in the Heritage Overlay schedule to the extent of the mapping.

Schedule:

External Paint Controls	No
Internal Alteration Controls	No
Tree Controls	No
Solar Energy Controls	Yes
Fences and Outbuildings	No
Prohibited Uses	No
Aboriginal Heritage Place	No

Map:



Area outlined in yellow indicates the extent of the proposed heritage overlay