
Place name:	Ascot Vale Heights School; Ascot Vale Special School No 5109 (former)
Address:	1 Tasma Street, Ascot Vale
Place typology:	Educational
Construction date range:	1977-79
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?

1 Tasma Street, Ascot Vale, is a large two-storey brick and concrete building in the post-war Brutalist style on a stepped and rectilinear L-shaped plan. Erected in 1977-79 as the new home for Melbourne's oldest special school, established in Fitzroy in 1911, the building was designed by Andreis Mezdreis from the office of Theodore Berman.

The significant features of the building include:

- The expression of functional zones through the stepped plan and articulation of volumes
- The stark beige-coloured face brickwork with off-form concrete banding at first floor level
- The bold angular expression of steep skillion rooflets and projecting raked wing walls

How is it significant?

1 Tasma Street, Ascot Vale, is of local aesthetic and architectural significance to the City of Moonee Valley.

Why is it significant?

1 Tasma Street, Ascot Vale, is significant as a notable, large-scale and externally intact example of a building in the mature Brutalist style of the later 1970s, which is not well represented in the City of Moonee Valley. This is evident in its use of stark brickwork combined with horizontal banding of off-form concrete, as well as its jagged sculptural form with raked wing walls that define boldly projecting window bays with steep skillion tray-deck rooflets. (Criterion E)

1 Tasma Street, Ascot Vale, is significant as an outstanding example of institutional architecture of the late 1970s. A unique example of a purpose-built State Government special school in the City of Moonee Valley, the building was innovative in its time, demonstrative of a radical shift from the more institutional type of buildings of the 1950s and '60s to a more sensitive and individualistic approach that would characterise special schools into the 1980s and beyond. It is notable for its stepped rectilinear plan, articulating separate blocks to define specific functional zones with connecting links and walkways. (Criterion F).

Description:

Occupying a large site between Tasma and Fernhill streets, the Ascot Vale Heights School is a large two-storey brick and concrete building in the post-war Brutalist style. It has a stepped plan comprising a linked row of three rectangular blocks with a smaller projecting block at the north end of the Fernhill Street side, forming an L-shaped footprint. This planning articulates the functional zones within: the west block (on Tasma Street) houses the school's administration, the central block provides classrooms, the east block (on Fernhill Street; known as the "Fernhill Annexe") contains specialist teaching areas and the projecting north block is the gymnasium, while the narrow links between each block contain service areas. The building is effectively flat roofed, with the roofs of the links are stepped down to a slightly lower level.

Elevations to Tasma Street and Fernhill Street are similarly expressed with stark walls of beige brickwork terminating at either end with raked wing walls at the upper level. Further raked wing walls project to define window bays with rows of anodized metal-framed sashes and steep skillion rooflets above and below, clad in metal tray decking. The Tasma Street frontage has two such bays, forming canopies to recessed porches below. Between them, a third and slightly recessed bay has a separate skillion rooflet and a row of windows at a lower level. Below this, there is a wide alcove with planter box and mosaic mural. The façade also has a horizontal band of off-form concrete, delineating the first floor.

The Fernhill Street elevation has one centrally-placed upper window bay with a double entry porch below, flanked by large rectangular windows. A full-width covered walkway has a flat roof on brick piers with square metal posts and panelled fascia, guttering and recessed downpipes, all painted blue. Both elevations have a matching blue-painted fascia along the parapet level, stepping down along the side and front eaves of the skillion rooflets. At the south end of

the Fernhill Annexe, the walkway extends to form a double carport for minibuses. At the north end, the walkway extends to link the gymnasium block. This has a slightly different elevational treatment, with separate steep skillion roofs to all four sides that incorporate clerestory windows to the triangular gable ends. At ground level, the walls of the gymnasium block are mostly blank, with projecting piers and narrow window bays that return at the corners.

Although largely concealed from public view, the north and south elevations of the main building are treated in a similar fashion, with each of the three component blocks containing pairs of window bays, framed by raked wing walls with steep skillion rooflets and rows of sash windows.

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. This relationship between the Woi-wurrung and the land, water, animals and plants, continues to this day (Living Histories, *Thematic Environmental History*, 2012: p.29).

The first Europeans to explore the area known as Moonee Valley was a surveyor, Charles Grimes in 1803. In 1836, settlers moving from Van Diemen's 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 Europeans (noting that the land was never ceded). The Wurundjeri were moved off their land which had a profound impact on their culture, health and language. 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, *Gap Heritage Study*, 2005: pp.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 Ascot Vale Special School in Fernhill Street was erected in 1977-79 as the new home for Victoria's oldest special school for intellectually disabled children, which had previously operated for six decades from premises in Fitzroy.

Fitzroy Special School No 3824 occupied a bluestone building at 40-48 Bell Street, built in 1855 as one of Victoria's first National Schools. With the passing of the *Education Act 1872*, the building was acquired by the government for use as a state school. In August 1911, permission was granted for the vacated building to become what was then referred to as "a school for mentally defective children" (*Argus*, 5 April 1913, p.9), which opened the following year with sixty students, a head teacher and three assistants. Enrolments swiftly increased, prompting the establishment of an adjunct facility, Montague Special School No 2884, which opened in South Melbourne in September 1914. A few more followed in the 1920s and '30s but it was not until 1957 that Victoria's first purpose-built special school opened in Footscray North. Many others followed during the 1960s and early 1970s. Due to such expansion, and adoption of a reduced student/staff ratio of 12:1, enrolment at Fitzroy Special School remained constant at sixty students into the early 1970s.

In 1976, new legislation allowed for the appointment of a dedicated Minister for Special Education, which ushered in a major phase of statewide expansion. The next few years saw special schools opened at Newton, Shepparton and elsewhere, and upgrading of existing ones at Croxton, Broadmeadows, Moorabbin West and Geelong. The venerable Fitzroy Special School, which had not been upgraded since a new principal's office was added in 1958, was slated for replacement by a new purpose-built complex at Ascot Vale. This was to be developed on a large site between Tasma Street and Fernhill Street, formerly occupied by the eponymous Victorian mansion, *Fernhill*. In a move that was to become increasingly common from the late 1970s, the Education Department entrusted the commission to a private architectural firm rather than to the architectural section of the Public Works Department (PWD). In this way, the new Ascot Vale Special School came to be designed by the office of Theodore Berman.

Born in Melbourne to Polish parents, Theodore Berman (1928-2017) studied architecture at the University of Melbourne while also working as a draftsman for the PWD. Registered as an architect in 1954, he began private practice, initially focusing on small-scale apartment blocks and retail fitouts. In 1957, he relocated his home-based practice to a larger office in St Kilda and took on extra staff. One key employee was Latvian émigré Arnolds Mezdreis (1924-2004), who became Berman's Senior Architect in 1960 and remained with the firm until 1977. Mezdreis had a major hand in many projects that bolstered the firm's reputation in the 1960s, notably Melbourne's first tenpin bowling alleys, a motel chain with interstate branches, and numerous high-rise office buildings. The Ascot Vale Special School was the last major project that Mezdreis designed in Berman's office before he left, later taking a position with Norris & Partners.

In late 1977, it was reported that construction would soon commence on the new \$1.3 million complex in Fernhill Street, slated for completed in 1979 (*Essendon Gazette*, 14 December 1977). It was further noted that the new facility, described as a “two-storey open area school to accommodate 144 children”, would replace the four-classroom complex in Bell Street, Fitzroy, formerly occupied by “Victoria’s oldest and smallest special school for the intellectually disabled”. Early the following year, it was formally announced that the tender for “erection of Special School No 5109” at Ascot Vale, with a contract price of \$1,364,706, had been awarded to Cockram Constructions Pty Ltd, which was then one of Melbourne’s oldest building companies (*Victoria Government Gazette*, 6 January 1978, p.358).



Perspective drawing prepared by Andreis Mezdreis from the office of Theodore Berman. Source: Ms Inta Mezdreis.

The Education Department’s annual report for 1979-80 recorded that the Ascot Vale Special School opened for the start of the 1980 school year in a “newly constructed school building” that superseded its former premises in Fitzroy. It initially accommodated sixty students, with one Robert Strauch as vice-principal. Strauch had commenced his teaching career in the early 1960s and then completed a Special Education course in 1975. Ten years after joining the Ascot Vale Special School as vice principal, he took over as principal and held that post until his retirement in 1999 (*Community News*, 21 September 1999). At that time, it was reported that, during Strauch’s two-decade tenure at the school, more than 700 students had passed through it. The school remains in operation, known as the Ascot Vale Heights School.

Sources:

Primary Sources

Community News, 21 September 1999.

Essendon Gazette, 14 December 1977.

“Feeble-minded children”, *Argus*, 5 April 1913, p.9.

“Mental health of children”, *The Age*, 4 May 1944, p.

The Office of Theodore Berman, perspective drawing of proposed school, undated. Courtesy Ms Inta Mezdris.

“Contracts accepted”, *Victoria Government Gazette*, 6 January 1978, p.358.

Education Department of Victoria Annual Report. 1978-79, 1979-80.

Secondary Sources

R. W. Chalmers, *The Annals of Essendon*. Vol 3, 1963-1985. (Essendon: Essendon Historical Society, 1999).

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, “Theodore Berman”, *Dictionary of Unsung Architects*, <www.builtheritage.com.au>

Emails to Simon Reeves from Ms Inta Mezdreis, daughter of Arnolds Mezdreis, October 2021.

Thematic Context:

City of Moonee Valley Thematic Environmental History, 2012

- 8.0 Building community life
- 8.2 Educating people

Comparative Analysis:

Special Schools in Victoria

Around thirty special schools operated in Victoria between 1912 and 1980, but the Ascot Vale Special School is one of only two in what is now the City of Moonee Valley – the other being Travancore Special School No 4465, located at what is now 50 Flemington Street, Travancore. Although these two schools were located in the same area, they otherwise had little in common, either historically or architecturally.

Dating back to 1933, Travancore Special School No 4465 was established in the eponymous mansion *Travancore*, acquired by the State Government seven years earlier. In contrast to post-war special schools, the facility originally functioned as a residential special school. In 1937, it expanded with an outpatient clinic for the intellectually disabled and was renamed the Travancore Developmental Centre. More buildings were added and, after the demolition of Travancore in 1945, the complex expanded further in the post-war era. In 1968, the site was redeveloped as a new residential and out-patient centre for what was then referred to as “emotionally disturbed children” (Blake, *Vision & Realisation*, p.148), known as the Travancore Psychiatric Developmental Centre and later simply as the Travancore Centre. Essentially an informal psychiatric hospital for children, administered by the Mental Health Authority, the onsite special school remained in operation, with 36 students by the early 1970s. Renamed in 1982 as the Travancore Child and Family Centre, the site has since become the Travancore Campus of the Royal Children’s Hospital Mental Health, while the onsite educational facility continues as the Travancore School. All of the remaining buildings appear to date from the 1968 redevelopment phase. Designed and built by the PWD, they are basic gable-roofed brick buildings of limited architectural interest when compared to the Ascot Vale Special School, designed a decade later by a private architectural firm.

In the absence of a pertinent local comparator, it is useful to consider the Ascot Vale Special School in the context of other special schools established in Melbourne metropolitan area (and Geelong) in the mid-to-late 1970s.

- Vermont South Special School, 22-30 Livingstone Rd, Vermont South (1974)
- Watsonia Special School (now Concord School), 411-423 Grimshaw Street, Watsonia (1974)
- St Albans Special School (now Jackson School), 40-46 Mulhall Drive, St Albans (1974-75)
- Ashwood Special School (now Ashwood School), 47-61 Montpelier Road, Ashwood (1976)
- Glenroy Special School, 1-3 Fran Street, Glenroy (1976) – *demolished*
- Shannon Park Special School, 2-22 Balcombe Road, Newtown (1977) – *demolished*
- Naranga Special School, 14 Naranga Crescent, Frankston (1977)
- Nepean Special School, 33 Klauer Street, Seaford (1979)

These schools exhibit a shift in aesthetics from the more institutional counterparts of the late 1950s and ‘60s, based on standard PWD designs for state primary, high and technical schools of the same era, to a more sensitive approach. This emerged in the earlier 1970s examples at Dandenong, Vermont South, Watsonia, St Albans and Ashwood, similarly expressed with courtyard plans, plain brickwork and flats roofs with panelled fascias and pop-up clerestories. As the decade drew to a close, special schools became more individualistic in design. In parallel with the key example at Ascot Vale were those at Newtown, Frankston and Seaford, which were different in style but all adopted less formalised planning and low hipped, gabled or gambrel rooflines that imparted an even less institutional character.

Similar local buildings of the mid-to-late 1970s

Architecturally and historically, the Ascot Vale Special School has few truly pertinent comparators in the City of Moonee Valley. The following is a selection of local buildings (all currently without a heritage Overlay (HO)) of comparable scale and era (and in one case, of comparable function) that share some of the building’s aesthetic qualities, albeit to less striking effect:

<p>New block, Moonee Ponds Central School Wilson Street, Moonee Ponds (1978)</p> <p>Opened in October 1978, this two-storey addition to a pre-war state school provided new library, art room, multi-purpose room, classrooms and staff areas. It is somewhat evocative of the Ascot Vale Special School in its dark-coloured brickwork and angular expression of projecting skillion-roofed bays, reflected in the angled corner wings.</p>	 <p>Source: Google StreetView, January 2021</p>
<p>Essendon Rowing Club, 48 The Boulevard, Moonee Ponds (1978; extended 1984)</p> <p>This two-storey brick building is broadly comparable to the Ascot Vale Special School in its use of dark-coloured face brickwork, projecting upper level with full-height glazing, irregular skillion roofline and a deliberate diagonal articulation, in this case with enclosed external staircases</p>	 <p>Source: Google StreetView, April 2021</p>
<p>St Dimitrios Cultural and Youth Centre, 319 Ascot Vale Road, Moonee Ponds (1978)</p> <p>Designed for the local Greek Orthodox Parish, this building has a somewhat ecclesiastical character, but is still mildly reminiscent of the subject building through its use of face brickwork and a varied skillion roofline that presents raked parapets to the street facade.</p>	 <p>Source: Google StreetView, January 2021</p>

Recommendation:

That the whole of 1 Tasma Street, Ascot Vale, be included in the Heritage Overlay schedule.

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