Place name:	The Mighty; Lawford's Furniture Pty Ltd Showroom (former)
Address:	690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds
Place typology:	Commercial
Construction date range:	1962
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:





690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds. Photographs by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, May 2022

Statement of Significance:

What is significant?

690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds, is a large commercial building on a corner site, dominated by a double-height glass-walled showroom with prominent flat roof and projecting roof signage. It was erected in 1962 as the new headquarters for a well-established local furniture retailer, replacing its original premises that were damaged by fire.

The significant features of the buildings include:

- The double-height multi-paned window wall that straddles the two street elevations
- The prominent flat roof with its boldly projecting canopy and sloping soffit
- The signage with its tapering metal-framed support and elongated light-box above roof level

The enclosed forecourt with glass balustrade is not of significance.

How is it significant?

690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds is of local aesthetic significance to the City of Moonee Valley.

Why is it significant?

690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds, is significant as an outstanding, rare and substantially intact example of a commercial building in the distinct sub-style of post-war modernism that is often referred to as Commercial Vernacular or "Googie". Effectively a heightened form of modernism, the style sprung from American antecedents of the 1940s and '50s and was characterised by use of deliberately eye-catching forms and features such as bold angles, prominent rooflines, over-emphasised structural elements, large areas of glazing, and overscaled signage. While the style was widespread in Australia from the late 1950s to the 1970s, it was later considered dated and many examples (Including others in the study area) were demolished or remodelled. Although slightly altered, this building retains the trademark futuristic form typical of the Googie style as well as its characteristic siting: a prominent corner site along a major commercial streetscape. The building remains a minor local landmark, with its distinctive blade signage and elevated light-box visible from some distance along Mt Alexander Road. (Criterion E)

Description:

The former Lawford's Pty Ltd showroom at 690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds, is a flat-roofed glass-walled retail premises in a distinct sub-style of post-war modernism that is referred to as Commercial Vernacular or "Googie". Occupying a corner site along this prominent commercial thoroughfare, the building's street frontage is expressed as two discrete parts: a single-storey shopfront to the left (north) and a more prominent double-height showroom at the corner. The former wing, akin to any conventional retail outlet along this strip, has a plain rendered parapet, projecting canopy and glazed shopfront. The taller corner element, set back from Mt Alexander Road to form a small open forecourt, has two fully-glazed facades of fixed sashes windows and a heavily-articulated slab-like roof that projects forward to form a massive canopy above the forecourt, with a raked soffit at the far end. A tapering steel-framed fin-like structure projects upward from the forecourt level, bisecting the canopy to support prominent horizontal signage (in the form of a large and elongated horizontal lightbox) above roof level.

The rear portion of the building is expressed in a more utilitarian fashion, with a mostly blank brick wall to the side (Davies Street) elevation, and four concrete-framed loading bays, with steel roller shutters and unpainted orange brick spandrels above, to the rear (Hinkins Street) elevation.

In the decades since it ceased to operate as a furniture showroom, the exterior of the building has been altered by its succession of subsequent occupants. The single-storey shopfront on Mt Alexander Road has evidently been reconfigured several times, and the small corner forecourt adapted as a dining area with an elevated floor and glazed balustrade. In the early 2000s, the blank wall to Davies Street still retained its original face brick finish and unpainted finish to the metal framing of the window wall, while the tapering sign frame was red and the fascias were dark blue. All of these elements have since been overpainted. As of 2022, the window framing is painted black and most of the other external elements (including the tapering sign frame, fascias, soffit and blank brick wall) are painted white. Some large

decals have also been affixed to the window glazing. The rooftop signage is currently blue, with raised white *san serif* lettering stating the words THE MIGHTY.

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, 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 building at 690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds, was erected in 1962 as a new showroom for local furniture retailers Lawfords Pty Ltd, replacing the firm's original building on the site that was damaged by fire.

The firm traced its origins back to September 1949, when a young David Ellis Lawford (1929-2001), having failed in his attempts to secure a position with a number of leading city furniture retailers, opted instead to start up his own business with two rented premises in Moonee Ponds: one on Holmes Road and another on Mt Alexander Road. The latter, located on the north corner of Davies Street, was a single-storey brick building with splayed corner. The premises had long been occupied by another local furniture manufacturer, Ern Jackson, who operated as Jackson's Direct Home Furnishers. Initially, Lawford shared the building with Jackson, using it for the manufacture of his own furniture while the smaller building on Holmes Road served as the principal retail outlet. When Jackson vacated the factory after a few months, Lawford took over the entire premises and, being considerably larger than the shop on Holmes Road, it became the firm's head office. During 1949, Lawford extended the building at the rear to provide additional storage.

Over the next few years, the business thrived as the homebuilding boom of the early 1950s brought with it a massive demand for new furniture. In 1952, Lawford took over an existing furniture business in Ringwood and re-branded it as a branch of his own firm, duly followed by further outlets in Northcote (1955) and Box Hill (1959). It was also during 1959 that Lawford and his wife Heather visited the United States to study the latest developments in furniture manufacture and retailing. While the Credit Squeeze of 1961 had a negative effect on many businesses; it allowed Lawford to further expand his empire by taking over the premises of ailing furniture retailers. By Easter 1962, he had opened a city branch in Flinders Lane and three more suburban outlets at South Melbourne, Frankston and Dandenong.

In September 1962, only a few months after the opening of these new branches, the firm's flagship premises in Mt Alexander Road was severely damaged by fire (*Age* 24 September 1962, p.3). The blaze, which broke out early one Saturday morning, was brought under control by nearly forty firemen. The rear of the building, used as storage for linoleum, was completely destroyed and, while the front showroom fared slightly better, half of its stock was destroyed by fire and the other half damaged by water. With firemen noting signs of forced entry, deliberate arson was suspected (but evidently never confirmed). With an estimated £40,000 damage and the building effectively destroyed, Lawford resolved to clear the site and erect what would become his firm's first entirely new purpose-built premises. As he later recalled in his unpublished memoir, "one of our major achievements was the redesigning and rebuilding of the Moonee Ponds shop, from fire to opening in fifty-nine days. Yes, the building trade was quiet but the councils, the Board of Works and everyone concerned really helped in a challenging but ambitious effort" (D Lawford, "History of Lawfords").

The new building was designed along the most progressive modernist lines, with a two-storey rear wing (containing warehouse and office space) and showroom on Mt Alexander Road that incorporated a double-height space with window wall and eye-catching blade signage that rose high above the flat roofline. The double-height showroom was slightly set back due to the truncated property boundary, reflected in the splayed corner of the earlier building on the site. The architect of the new building remains unknown, as no original drawings appear to have survived in the Council's archives and even Lawford's three children (all of whom were involved in the family business at various times) were unable to confirm or speculate upon who might have designed it. Regardless of the architect's identify, it seems very likely that the

form of the building was influenced by modern retail premises that Lawford had encountered during his American tour in 1959.

Following the opening of its new flagship store in late November 1962, Lawford's furniture empire continued to expand with new branches opened at Footscray (1963), Thornbury (1969) and Glen Waverley (1969). The later 1960s ushered in a major phase of reconfiguration, with the branches at Flinders Lane and South Melbourne closed and the operations of the latter relocated to Thornbury.

The next few years saw the relocation of the Box Hill branch to larger premises around the corner, the extension of the Footscray shop, and the consolidation of two sub-branches at Frankston into a single outlet on another site. The firm's ninth and final branch, at Gardiner, opened in October 1972. With the firm's headquarters having since been transferred to Thornbury, the building at Moonee Ponds was offered for sale by auction in October 1980 (*Age*, 4 August 1980, p.24). It came up for sale again in 1988, and then again in 1994. In recent decades, the building has been occupied by a succession of restaurants and bars. As of 2022, it is occupied by Mighty Craft, a craft beverage company that has multiple outlets across Australia.

Sources:

Primary Sources

"Heavy loss in furniture shop blaze", *Age* 24 September 1962, p.3.
David Lawford snr, "History of Lawfords", 4pp typescript, undated. Lawford family collection.

Secondary Sources

Telephone interviews and emails with David Lawford's three children: David jnr, Geoffrey and Janice, October 2021.
Simon Reeves, "Googie goes Australian", *Australian Modern*, Vol 1, No 1 (2012), pp.12-15.

Thematic Context:

City of Moonee Valley Thematic Environmental History, 2012

5.0 Building Victoria's industries and workforce

5.3 Marketing and retailing

Comparative Analysis:

Commercial Vernacular buildings in the City of Moonee Valley:

The former Lawford's showroom is an example of a post-war business premises that was located along a major retail strip and had a commercial imperative to maintain a prominent physical presence and remain highly visible to the public, so that the building itself becomes a form of self-advertising and/or corporate branding. This approach to the design of deliberately eye-catching buildings, now often referred to Commercial Vernacular, Roadside Architecture or "Googie", became widespread in the third quarter of the twentieth century and was well represented in what is now the City of Moonee Valley by a diverse range of commercially-oriented buildings that included not only retail showrooms but also tenpin bowling alleys, branch banks, supermarkets, service stations and franchised fast-foot restaurants.

- Metropolitan Bowl, 72 Fletcher Street, Essendon (Harry Winbush, 1962) – *demolished 2004*
- Branch bank for State Savings Bank (former), 281 Buckley Street, Essendon (1965) – *altered*
- Car showroom for Duhig Ford, 100 Keilor Road, Essendon North (1967) – *demolished 2013*
- Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, 655-657 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds (1969) – *much altered*
- Ollie's Trolley Restaurant, 1098 Mt Alexander Road, Essendon (circa 1978) – *demolished 2004*
- "Motorville" car showroom (former), 570 Mt Alexander Road, Ascot Vale (Eddie Djounayia, 1979) – *altered*

The two car showrooms listed here (of which only one still stands) remain most pertinent comparators for their use of extensive glazing to the street frontage as well as their bold architectural forms: the earlier example having a distinctive

zigzag roofline and the latter with prominent curve expressed in both the glazing and the over-emphasised roof fascia. The Metropolitan Bowl, which was the only bowling alley ever built in what is now the City of Moonee Valley, was the quintessential Google building with its brick feature wall, cursive lettering, bowling pin motifs and freestanding neon blade signage. The local outlets of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Ollie's Trolley adopted the standard livery of their respective brands: the former (one of the first in Melbourne) being a pavilion-like building with trademark bright red pyramidal roof and hipped belvedere, and the latter with a tile-clad mansard roof and ovoid dormer windows. The former State Bank branch in Buckley Street, despite being a narrow-fronted building in an established retail strip, evoked a Googie spirit through its deeply recessed prow-like glass shopfront with a prominently cantilevered and canted canopy roof (not unlike the similarly over-emphasised flat roofline of the former Lawford's Showroom).

Considered in isolation, the prominent roof signage of the former Lawford's showroom (now stating THE MIGHTY) can be compared to other major examples of illuminated signage that constitute a parallel manifestation of post-war Commercial Vernacular. While such forms of outdoor advertising once proliferated in what is now the City of Moonee Valley (with Puckle Street already a noted hotspot for neon signs as early as the 1930s), they began to be actively discouraged following revisions to the City of Essendon's advertising policy in the later 1980s (*Essendon Gazette* 4 February 1987). Consequently, relatively few examples of vintage post-war signage survived into the twenty-first century, and fewer still remain today.

- Neon sign, Morocco Snack Bar (former), 637 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds (circa 1957) – *removed 2000*
- Neon sign, Metropolitan Bowl, 70 Fletcher Street, Essendon (1962) – *removed 2004*
- Blade sign and dancing mannequins, Essendon Danse Academy, 305 Buckley Street, Essendon (1963) – *extant*
- Neon sign, Biz Buzz Hardware (former), 23 Keilor Road, Essendon North (1966) – *removed 2004*
- Neon sign, Biz Buzz Hardware (former), 445 Keilor Road, Niddrie (1966) – *removed 2004*
- Neon sign, Tee Dee Knitwear Factory (former), 541 Keilor Road, Niddrie (1967) –*HO338*
- Shark-shaped sign, Fish & Chip shop, 89 Hoffmans Road, Niddrie (c1968) – *identified in previous study; no HO*
- Facade signage, Chung On Restaurant (former), 593-597 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds – *HO358*
- Blade signage, "The Shopping Place" Arcade, 441-443 Keilor Road, Niddrie (1970s) – *altered*
- Neon sign for Ansett Airlines, Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds (1970s) – *demolished* [mounted on roof of "comfort station" built in 1957 adjacent to bus depot, Moonee Ponds Junction]

The following illustrate the two most pertinent local comparators for the subject building:



Car showroom for Duhig Ford Pty Ltd
100 Keilor Road, Essendon North (circa 1967; demol)
Source: Google StreetView, December 2009



Motorville car showroom (former)
570 Mt Alexander Road, Ascot Vale (1979; altered)
Source: Google StreetView, January 2021

Recommendation:

That the whole of 690-694 Mt Alexander Road, Moonee Ponds, 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