Place name:	Robertson Residence (former)
Address:	31 Alfred Road, Essendon
Place typology:	Residential
Construction date range:	1958
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:



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, May 2022

Statement of Significance:

What is significant?

31 Alfred Road, Essendon is a split-level flat-roofed post-war modernist cream brick house on an elevated site, with an integrated garage at the lower level and an unusual curvilinear plan form reflected in its asymmetrical street facade. It was erected in 1958 for David and Agnes Robinson, to a design by architect and local resident Norman Brendel.

The significant features of the house include:

- The unusual plan form, with freeform curves and a projecting three-quarter circular bay to the north
- The asymmetrical street facade with curved walls and fascias and faceted window and garage door bays
- The splayed corner bay of stack-bond brickwork, outlined by a projecting white-painted frame
- The crazy-paved stonework to external paths, steps and terraces

How is it significant?

31 Alfred Road, Essendon is of local architectural and associative significance to the City of Moonee Valley.

Why is it significant?

31 Alfred Road, Essendon is significant as a highly unusual example of an architect-designed modernist house of the later 1950s. Whiles its flat roof, stark cream brick walls, large windows and white-painted joinery are all characteristic of that era, the distinctive plan form, based on freeform curves, is idiosyncratic. This geometry has been echoed in the elevational treatment, with curving walls and fascias to the street frontage as well as faceted window and garage door bays that respond to the curves. Further visual interest has been introduced by the splayed corner bay, with stack-bond brickwork set into a projecting white-painted frame, demonstrative of the late 1950s fashion for Featurism. (Criterion E)

31 Alfred Road, Essendon is an excellent and substantially intact example of the residential work of architect and local resident Norman Brendel, who lived in Essendon from the early 1940s until the mid-1970s and is known to have designed a number of houses in the area (including his own in Pascoe Vale Road), as well as civic and educational commissions. (Criterion H)

Description:

The former Robertson Residence at 31 Alfred Road, Essendon, is a large flat-roofed cream brick house in the post-war modernist style. Occupying a site that slopes upward from the street, the single-storey house is partially elevated to include a double garage at the lower level, with a flight of steps leading up to the front door. Consequent to the irregular wedge-shaped form of the block, the house has an unusual plan with angular and curving elements, including a rear wing (not visible from the street) of sweeping curved form. This geometry is expressed in the asymmetrical triple-fronted street facade which comprises a slightly concave wall to the projecting garage bay, a curving angled wall to the recessed entry bay, and a sharply splayed corner bay. The first two bays have large and relatively conventional windows above the entry stairs and garage, with multi-paned timber framed sashes. The splayed corner bay is blank and windowless, enlivened by decorative stack bond brickwork and a white-painted concrete frame. A flight of steps, with black-painted mild steel railing leads up to front door, set into the side of the garage wing. The eaves, which curve and step to follow the irregular shape of the facade, have wide plain fascias with sloping soffits and pegboard lining.

The house has a cream brick retaining wall along the street frontage, which returns along one side of the concrete driveway, and a matching plinth-like letterbox. At the far right (east) end of the front wall, a set of concrete steps leads up to a curving concrete path, which splits to provide access to the front entry steps and a second flight of crazy-paved stone steps that lead around the side of the house to a metal fence and gateway.

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).

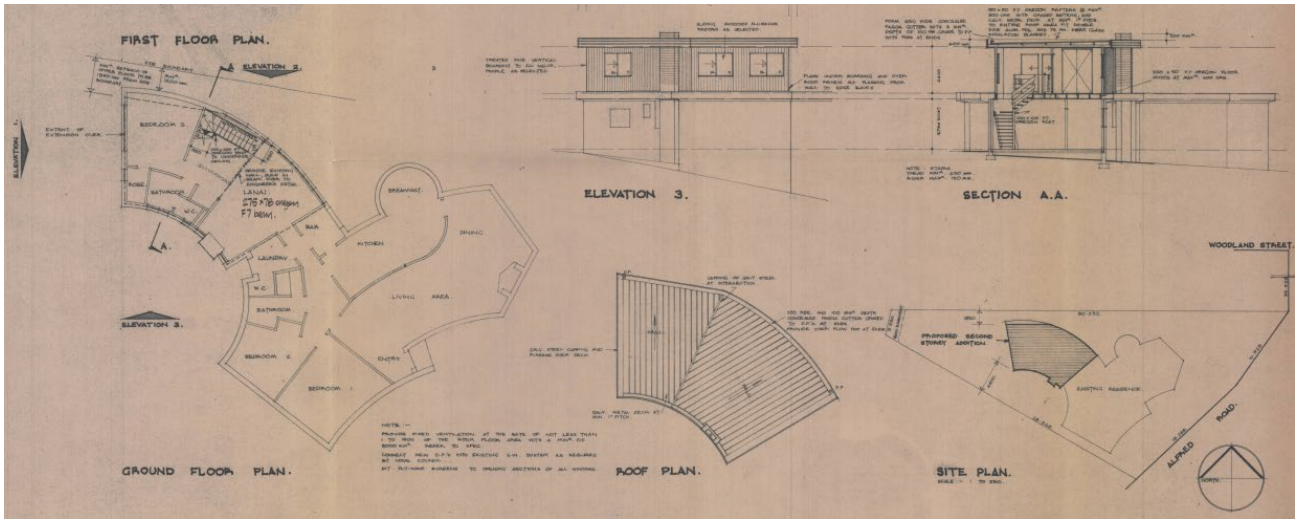
Place history

The house at 31 Alfred Road, Essendon, was erected in 1958 for David and Agnes Robertson, to a design by architect and local resident Norman Brendel.

A chemist by profession, David Robertson (1903-1982) was born in Footscray and lived there until his marriage in June 1930 to Agnes Stuart Buchanan Young (1909-1997). The couple initially resided in Camberwell but had moved to Essendon by the early 1940s, taking up residence in a pre-war bungalow at 47 Thomson Road. In November 1957, Agnes Robertson acquired the title to a block of vacant land in Alfred Road (Certificate of Title, 8179/666). This wedge-shaped allotment constituted Lot 3 of a new 20-lot residential subdivision along the north side of Alfred Road, which had been created only a few months earlier (Lodged Plan 40954, dated 23/07/1957). Most of the allotments in this new subdivision would be developed over the next few years, into the early 1960s.

To design their new house, the Robertsons turned to architect Norman Brendel, a longtime local resident who had lived in Pascoe Vale Road (in a house of his own design) since the early 1940s. Born in Northcote, Brendel (1918-1998) commenced his architectural career in 1934 as a junior draftsman in the office of well-known inter-war practitioner J H Esmond Dorney. After a brief stint with Sale & Keage, Brendel joined the office of Arthur Plaisted and rapidly rose up the ranks until he was promoted to partnership in 1945, when the practice was re-badged as Plaisted, Warner & Brendel. From the early post-war period, Brendel embraced a progressive modernist style (contrasting with the more conservative approach of his two partners Arthur Plaisted and Lawrence Warner), duly leaving the office to establish his own private practice in the mid-1950s. Brendel's subsequent career was varied, encapsulating single private dwellings as well as larger apartment developments and medium-scaled non-residential work. During the 1970s, he moved from Essendon to Toorak and later lived in Caulfield before retiring to Queensland, where he died.

For David and Agnes Robertson, architect Brendel proposed a single-storey brick house on an irregular plan generated by curving geometry, which responded to the somewhat awkward wedge-shaped site. This non-orthogonal geometry was reflected elsewhere in the building, including several curved interior walls as well as a breakfast nook on the north side of the house in the form of a projecting three-quarter circle. The Robertsons remained living in the house until 1968, when they offered it for sale by auction. Promoted as a seven-room brick veneer dwelling with kitchenette, the house was sold prior to auction for the sum of $30,100 (*The Age*, 3 June 1968, p.12).



Excerpt of working drawings for 1978 additions by Macleod & Macleod Pty Ltd. Source: City of Moonee Valley

The new owners were barrister Christian Augustinus and his wife Beverley, who would remain living there for almost fifty years. During their long tenure in residence, the Augustinuses extended the house to accommodate their large family of seven children. Working drawings, prepared by a local design and drafting firm, are dated February 1978 and proposed a timber-framed partial second storey at the rear of the house. Following the geometry of Brendel's curved plan, the new addition provided three more bedrooms accessed by a dog-leg staircase. Clad in vertical treated pine boards with a flat roof, the addition also necessitated the vertical extension of the existing cream brick chimney, which was realised in matching brickwork. The Augustinus family sold the property in 2019.

Sources:

Primary Sources

The Age
Lodged Plan No 40,954, dated 23 July 1957. <www.landata.vic.gov.au>
Certificate of Title, Volume 8179, Folio 666, created 19 November 1957. <www.landata.vic.gov.au>
Macleod & Macleod Pty Ltd, "Proposed second storey timber addition to residence at No 31 Alfred Road, Essendon, for Mr and Mrs C Augustinus", working drawings, dated February 1978. City of Moonee Valley.

Secondary Sources

Email from Ms Beverley Augustinus, 13 July 2021.
Built Heritage Pty Ltd, "Norman Brendel", *Dictionary of Unsung Architects*, <www.builtheritage.com.au>

Thematic Context:

City of Moonee Valley Thematic Environmental History, 2012

6.0 Building towns, cities and the garden state

6.7 Making homes for Victorians

Comparative Analysis:

The following are some notable architect-designed modernist houses in the City of Moonee Valley from 1955 to 1959:

- Robinson Residence, 73 Mooltan Street, Flemington (Bruce Robinson/Armstrong & Orton, 1955) – *part of HO23*
- House, 53 Matthews Avenue, Airport West (Small Homes Service, circa 1956) – *demolished 2014*
- Manse for Essendon Presbyterian Church (now St John's Uniting Church), 853 Mt Alexander Road, Essendon (Earle & Bunbury ,1957) – *Individual HO87*
- Goddard Residence, 49 Clydebank Road, Essendon (Ernest Fooks, 1957) – *standing*
- Barden Residence, 269 Napier Street, Strathmore (Lines, MacFarlane & Marshall, 1957) – *included in this study*
- Colwell Residence, 163 Keilor Road, Essendon (Anatol Kagan, circa 1957) – *demolished 2018*
- W C Abbey Residence, 31 Wickham Grove, Strathmore (Earle & Bunbury, 1958) – *included in this study*
- Robertson Residence, 31 Alfred Road, Essendon (Norman Brendel, 1958) – *included in this study*
- Residence and dental clinic, 309 Keilor Road, Essendon North (Borland & Trewenack, 1958) – *demolished*

It is noted that only two of these examples are currently protected by the heritage overlay (HO).

In the City of Moonee Valley, as elsewhere architect-designer houses of the mid-to late 1950s tend to follow the prevailing International Modernist style, characterised by a rectilinear block-like expression with low-pitched rooflines, a limited palette of finishes and generous glazing, often as full-height window sashes with glazed doors. This was typified in the study area by the quintessential skillion-roofed Small Homes Service house in Matthews Avenue (demolished), a fine two-storey example at 163 Keilor Road with the fashionable butterfly roof (demolished), and, further long Keilor Road

at No 309, the exceptional example (also demolished) with a box-like second storey in a decidedly Seidler-esque mode, with double-height window wall and geometric mural.

Amongst extant examples, this style of housing is demonstrated by a flat-roofed house still standing at Napier Street and others at Mooltan Street and Mt Alexander Road, with low gabled rooflines. Other survivors, such as those in Clydebank Road and Wickham Grove, have steeper hipped or gabled roofs, in what appears to have been a deliberate attempt to evoke a more traditionally domestic idiom. None of these houses, however, are truly comparable to the unusual plan form and facade expression of the Robertson Residence at 31 Alfred Road, which must be considered a more idiosyncratic manifestation of post-war modernism.

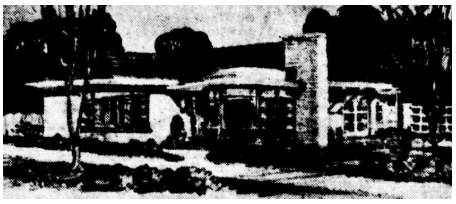
The curved plan form and external walls of the Robertson Residence are demonstrably unusual at the local level. The following is a list of some other post-war residential buildings that utilize similar forms, to a greater or lesser degree:

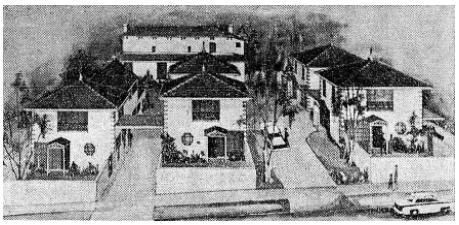
- Block of villa units, 1-11 Gracedale Court, Strathmore (1976)
  – *a development of flat-roofed split-level villa units clustered in a half-circle at the end of a cul-de-sac*
- Gilbertson Residence, 26 Nicholson Street, Essendon (Woods Marsh, 1989)
  – *a more recent example of an architect-designed house with a gently concave facade*

In the absence of truly pertinent local comparators, comparisons may also be drawn with other buildings designed by Norman Brendel that adopted similarly unusual curving or angular geometry in their plan form and expression:

- House, 6 Lasiandra Avenue, Nunawading (1958) – *house on jagged angular plan; demolished*
- House, 95 Olinda-Monbulk Road, Olinda (c1960s) – *hillside house on arc-shaped plan; standing*
- Home for the Aged (Ghiraween) for Brighton Methodist Church, 80 Outer Crescent, Brighton (1966)
  – *two-storey development comprising a linked series of arc-shaped wings; demolished circa 2012*
- House, 28 Cosham Street, Brighton (1973) – *house with H-shaped plan of two arc-shaped wings; standing*

Other local examples of the work of Norman Brendel

Brendel Residence, 274 Pascoe Vale Road, Essendon (1940-41) This simple hip-roofed double-fronted brick dwelling is conventional in its form and detailing compared the more visually striking houses that Brendel designed from the later 1950s. When compared to Brendel's original working drawings (dated December 1940), it is apparent that the house has been altered by the removal of an unusual bow window on the street facade as well as the addition of vertical timber cladding, eaves brackets and new entry porch. It is unconfirmed whether these changes were made by Brendel himself, during his long period in residence.	 *Source: Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2022*
House, Langs Road, Ascot Vale (1947) A modestly-scaled cream brick house, distinguished by its irregular plan form with curved bays and corners. Designed under the auspices of Plaisted, Warner & Brendel and published in the property column of the *Argus* newspaper, it has not been conclusively located and it presumed to have been demolished.	 *Source: Argus, 11 December 1947*
Elderly Citizens' Recreation Centre for City of Essendon, Kellaway Avenue, Moonee Ponds (1956) A small community building in a relatively conventional modernist idiom, noted for its deeply recessed entry porch and its unusual use of textured clinker brickwork. As a non-residential building, it is not otherwise directly comparable to the subject building in Alfred Road. It lacks some of the more overtly decorative and playful elements evident in the latter.	 *Source: Built Heritage Pty Ltd*

Mellissa Close flats, 28-30 Mellissa Street, Strathmore (1968) A development of six two-storey hip-roofed brick townhouses conceived in a lively mock Georgian Revival style, with quoined corners, octagonal windows, multi-paned sashes and verandahs with cast iron columns and filigree lacework. This mock-colonial style, which was briefly fashionable in the late 1960s, is a significant departure from the more idiosyncratic modernist style that characterised Brendel's earlier work.	 *Source: Age, 13 July 1968.*

Recommendation:

That the whole of 31 Alfred Road, Essendon, 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