

HERITAGE CITATION

Townhouses, 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern



Figure 1. 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (GJM Heritage, November 2020).

DATE: June 2021

TOWNHOUSES, 17 SORRETT AVENUE, MALVERN

Place type: Townhouses	Architect: Merchant Builders
Construction Date: 1967	Builder: Merchant Builders
Recommendation: Include in the Heritage Overlay	Extent of Overlay: To the extent of the property boundary

Locality History

The City of Stonnington stands on the Traditional Lands of the Woi wurrung and Boon Wurrung Peoples of the East Kulin Nations. Archaeologists believe that Aboriginal People have been in Victoria for more than 30,000 years. Throughout this long history their relationship with the landscape (where and how they live) has changed according to factors such as climate change, resource availability, and cultural change (Context 2006:10).

The first European settler in the Malvern district was John Gardiner in 1835, a pastoralist from New South Wales who was one of the first overlanders to Port Phillip. He pastured his stock near the junction of Gardiner's Creek and the Yarra River and is the namesake of Gardiner's Creek, Gardiner's Creek Road (now Toorak Road) and both the locality and the Shire of Gardiner (before they were re-named Malvern). The first recorded use of the name Malvern was in January 1854, when barrister Charles B. G. Skinner named his hotel on the corner of Malvern and Glenferrie roads the 'Malvern Hill' after a district in England. The name for the Shire of Malvern was derived from Malvern Hill Estate, a private subdivision in the area dating to 1856 (City of Stonnington [CoS]; Context 2006:34).

The first land sales in the area were held in 1854 and most original Crown grantees subdivided their allotments for resale (Context 2006:41; 2009:4). Gardiner's Road District was proclaimed in 1856 before Gardiner Shire was formed in 1871, which was renamed Malvern Shire in 1878 (CoS). The municipal boundary comprised the current localities of Malvern (previously Gardiner), Malvern East, Glen Iris (south of Gardiners Creek), Kooyong, Armadale (east of Kooyong Road), Toorak (east of Kooyong Road) and Chadstone (west of Warrigal Road). Early directories listed Malvern and Malvern East as the one locality, until 1910.

The former Malvern Shire saw slow population growth to 1881, by which time it totalled just under 2,000 people (Victorian Places). In 1879, the Oakleigh Railway Line was opened along the southern extent of the municipality, through Malvern, Armadale, Toorak and Hawksburn to join the existing line at South Yarra. The arrival of the Oakleigh railway coincided with the start of the land boom, which resulted in considerable urban growth. In the 1880s the district comprised substantial residences on large allotments, as well as pastoral and agricultural holdings (including market gardens and orchards) and commercial development (Context 2006:41, 65-6). During the 1880s boom period, the municipality saw a dramatic increase in population, quadrupling to approximately 8,000 by 1891, and steadily increasing to 10,000 by 1901 (Victorian Places). In the 1890s a number of timber houses were built in Malvern as an economy measure, but some residents complained that wooden houses would degenerate into slums. Concern about this development led to a slum abolition movement and subsequently, c1912, Malvern Council began to declare brick areas, where timber houses were not permitted. By 1916 the Council had also fixed a minimum area for individual housing allotments at 6000 square feet, with minimum frontages of fifty feet (Context 2006:128).

The railway line along the northern extent of the municipality was established in 1890 through the Glen Iris Valley from Burnley. Stations were established at Heyington, Kooyong, Tooronga, Gardiner, Glen Iris and Darling, however, expected residential development in their vicinity stalled during the 1890s following the

economic collapse (Context 2006:66). The 1893 *Australian Handbook* (as cited in Victorian Places) described Malvern as ‘an elevated residential suburb’, served by a line of omnibuses from Prahran, with many leading merchants and professional men living in the area in pleasantly situated ‘dwellings of a superior class’. The entry noted that a number of notable mansions had been erected by this date, and that the market gardens and orchards were ‘steadily being reduced, and cut up into building allotments, on which [were] being erected many handsome villas and business establishments’ (Victorian Places). The municipality saw rapid development and urbanisation from 1900 and it was declared a Borough and then a Town in 1901. In 1911 the municipality was declared a City, with a residential population of 16,000 (Context 2006:86; Victorian Places).

The Prahran and Malvern Tramways Trust was established in 1908, with electric tramlines opening along High Street in 1910-14, Glenferrie Road in 1910-13, to the south along Wattletree Road in 1910-12, and Malvern Road in 1915. The arrival of the tramlines further drove the development of commercial centres in the immediate vicinity and residential development beyond. New train stations were built at Armadale, Hawksburn, Malvern and Toorak between 1908 and 1918, and at Malvern East in 1929 (Context 2006:70-2, 113; Victorian Places).

Residential development during the early twentieth century generally occurred on newly subdivided estates or on nineteenth century subdivisions that had remained partly or wholly undeveloped during the 1890s depression (Context 2009:5). In 1912 it was reported that 800 houses a year were being built in the (by then) City of Malvern, which boasted ‘a progress unprecedented by any other suburb’ (Context 2009:128). In the decade between 1911 and 1921 the population in the City of Malvern doubled, from 16,000 to 32,000 residents, and then increased steadily to 43,000 by 1933 (Victorian Places). This population growth saw development spread to the Glen Iris Valley and the outer reaches of the City, in Malvern East. The housing stock in this eastern part of the municipality was more characteristically uniform and unadorned in comparison to housing in Malvern. Kooyong’s development was substantially completed by the end of the 1920s (Context 2006:128, 131).

By 1946 the *Australian Blue Book* (as cited in Victorian Places) stated that Malvern was one of the ‘leading residential suburbs of the Metropolis’. It comprised the substantial homes of many of Melbourne’s leading citizens, in what was termed ‘The Garden City’ due to the number of parks and public gardens. Development in the City of Malvern steadied from the 1930s, with the population averaging 45,000 until the 1990s (Victorian Places). The City of Malvern amalgamated with the City of Prahran in 1994, to form the City of Stonnington.

Place History

The townhouse development at 17 Sorrett Avenue was built in 1967-8 by Merchant Builders for Tract P/L. It was built on land originally subdivided from the Sorrett Estate in 1909.

The Sorrett Estate was formed from the subdivision of Sorrett, a large single-storey mansion located between Glenferrie and Spring roads to the north of High Street (Figure 2). The mansion’s extensive estate was subdivided in 1909 following the death of its owner, Mr F Throssel, creating ‘9 magnificent building sites’ with eight allotments having frontages to Chilcote Avenue and one block (the subject property) containing one acre 17 perches running from Chilcote Avenue to Sorrett Avenue (Sorrett Estate, Malvern Subdivision Advertisement, 1909 MH368; *Herald*, 3 November 1909:3) (Figure 3). The highly sought-after estate was promoted for its prime location within easy distance from both Armadale and Malvern Railway Station, and its proximity to Malvern Town Hall and the Malvern Public Gardens (Sorrett Estate, Malvern Subdivision Advertisement, 1909 MH368). It was praised for its idyllic setting, with advertisements stating that:

The view from this estate is known throughout the district, and is regarded as being unsurpassed in the metropolis. The estate is on the brow of the hill in Sorrett Avenue, off

Glenferrie road, and close to the Malvern Town Hall. The elevation is such as to look over the Glen Iris Valley and across rolling downs right up to the Dandenong Ranges, whereon the farms and buildings can readily be discerned with the naked eye (Herald, 3 November 1909:3).

By 1915, a brick house had been constructed at 17 Sorrett Avenue (S&M). In 1940, it was described as a brick villa with 11 rooms and the site comprised a brick garage, tool shed and a glass house (*Argus*, 6 July 1940:14). The ‘stately one storey residence in glorious country garden’ was advertised for sale in 1962 (*Age*, 27 January 1962:42) (Figures 4 & 5).

The property was purchased by Tract P/L (a precursor to landscape architecture and planning company, Tract Consultants, which was established in 1973) in 1967, at which time the existing house was demolished and replaced with a townhouse development designed by architect, Graeme Gunn for Merchant Builders (Malvern Valuation Field Card).

Merchant Builders was one of Australia’s most influential project house-building companies. Founded in 1965 by David Yencken and John Ridge, the pair established the company to address a perceived gap in the market for quality, medium-cost housing in Australia. Yencken and Ridge, and the firm’s consultant architect Graeme Gunn and landscape architect Ellis Stones, were deeply interested in how to increase density in Melbourne’s inner and outer suburbs without losing the connection with landscape, and promoted the idea that house, interiors, landscape and site should be harmoniously integrated by top design professionals (MSD 2015:61).

Their cluster housing projects promoted this integration of architecture, landscape setting, shared space, native planting, environmental design, construction, interior design and marketing. The townhouse development at 17 Sorrett Avenue was one of the company’s earliest cluster developments. Designed for higher density living, the project was ‘planned to provide privacy from neighbours, enclosed garden areas sometimes as large as a suburban block, a functional and pleasing design, and overall an exciting architectural grouping’ (MSD 2015:61) (see Figures 6-9). As with the majority of Merchant Builders’ early designs, the landscape was designed by noted landscape designer, Ellis Stones. The Sorrett Avenue development comprised nine townhouses of a combination of courtyard single storey, two-storey and two-storey split level designs, ranging in size from three to five bedrooms (MSD 2015:61). The development coincided with the introduction of the *Strata Titles Act 1967*, which governed building subdivision in Victoria at the time.

Marketing for the Sorrett Avenue townhouse development highlighted its various design principles, including siting, landscaping and privacy:

‘Sorrett Drive, at the bottom of Sorrett Avenue, Malvern, leads into a beautiful site at the top of Malvern Hill overlooking the Dandenongs. The site is in a quiet secluded area, surrounded by large houses and gardens, away from traffic noise, but still close to main access roads such as Glenferrie, Toorak and Malvern Roads. Many mature trees from an old garden have been carefully preserved...The buildings have been carefully planned so that there is considerable variety of design within an overall harmony of form and material. Each house has a private garden’ (MSD 2015:72).

Later advertising praised the siting of the townhouses to ‘capture the sun and benefit from the large landscaped garden’ (*Age*, 1 December 1973:11) and the ‘exceptionally convenient and secluded location’ (*Age*, 30 October 1978:10). The townhouses remain in use as individual residences.

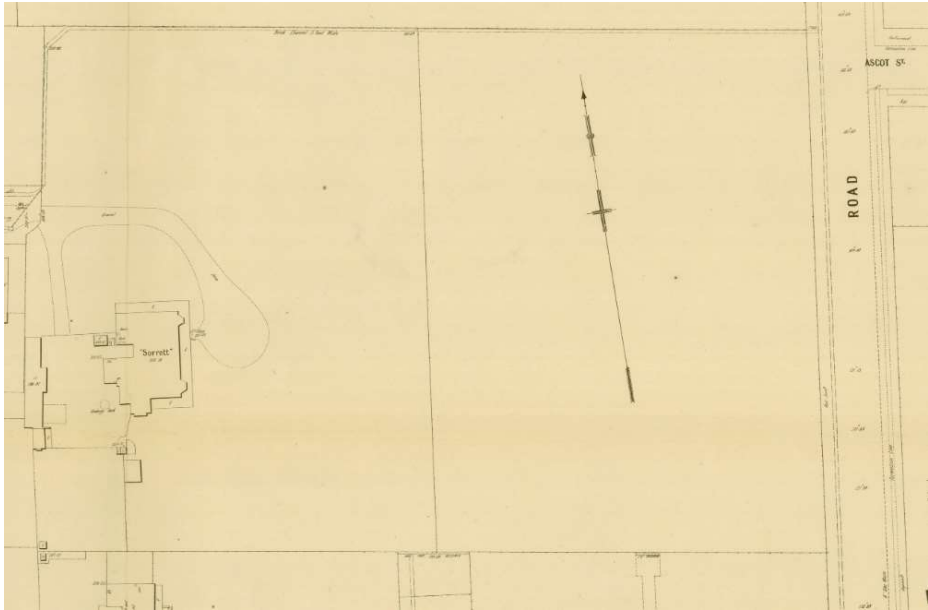


Figure 2. MMBW Detail Plan No 1760 showing the extensive landholding of 'Sorrett' prior to subdivision, 1902 (SLV)

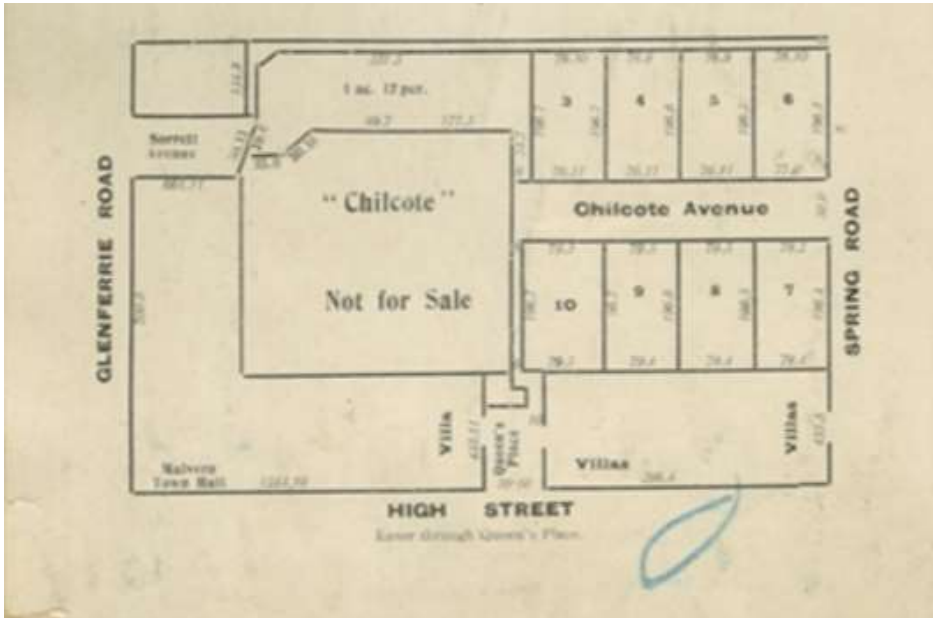


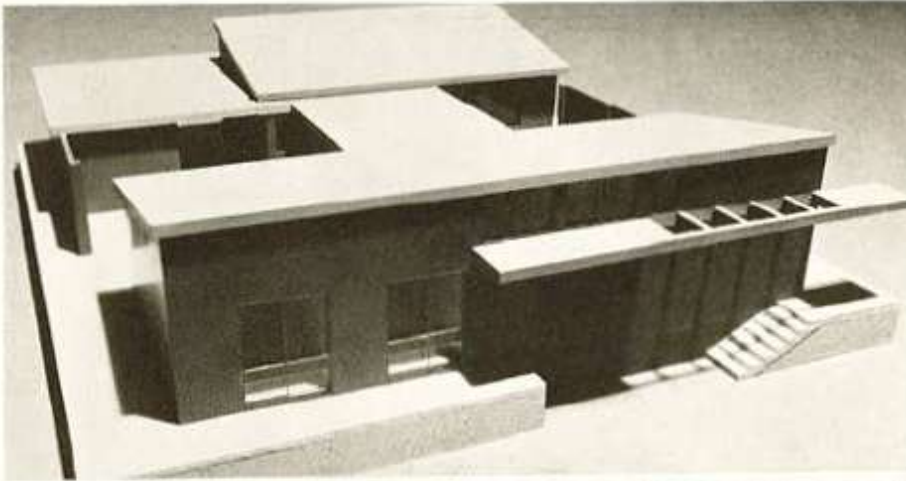
Figure 3. Sorrett Avenue subdivision notice, 1909, with the property at 17 Sorrett Avenue indicated (SHC)



Figure 4. Detail of aerial view of Malvern looking north-east from Town Hall, c.1930. The house at 17 Sorrett Avenue is indicated (SLV).

Figure 5. Aerial showing 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern, 1945 (Landata)





Figures 6 & 7. Models of townhouse development at 17 Sorrett Avenue, 1967-8 (MSD 2015:62)

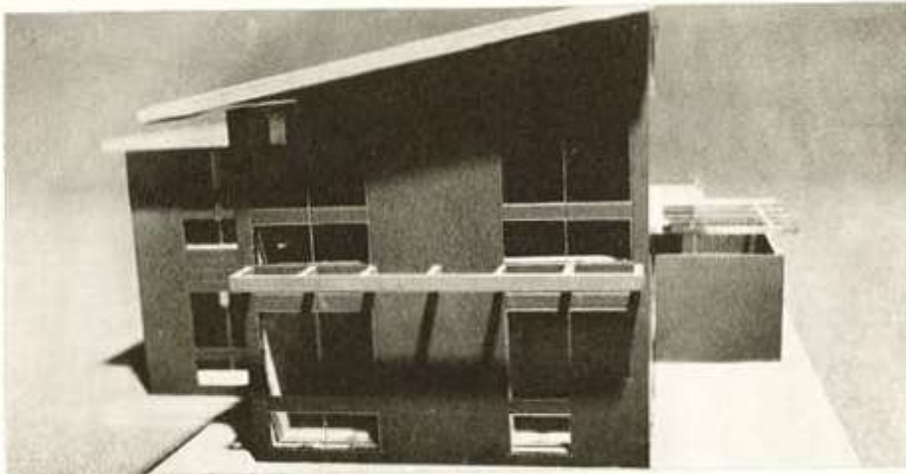
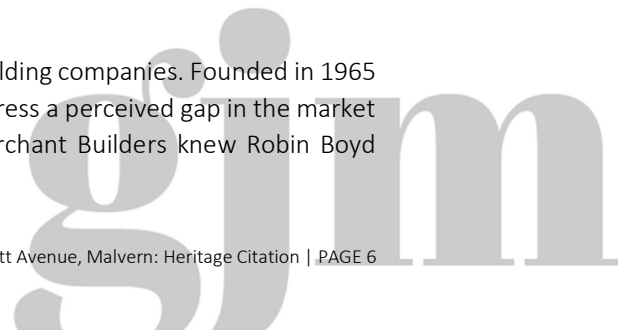


Figure 8 & 9. Townhouse development at 17 Sorrett Avenue by Merchant Builders, 1968 (SLV)

Merchant Builders, project house builders

In the 1960s a new range of Australian building companies offered a new concept in residential construction – project houses. These architect-designed houses promised better quality design than the average speculatively built house (Quilford 2016).

Merchant Builders was one of Australia’s most influential project house-building companies. Founded in 1965 by David Yencken and John Ridge, the pair established the company to address a perceived gap in the market for quality, medium-cost housing in Australia. Many of those within Merchant Builders knew Robin Boyd



through professional and social networks and were influenced by his criticisms of suburban housing as discussed in *The Australian Ugliness* (1960). Yencken and Ridge aspired to reform the design of suburban housing. Drawing on their past business experience in motels and the timber and construction industries, they took a comprehensive approach to design, integrating architecture, landscape and interiors (Gartner 2012:451; Quilford 2016). Robin Boyd wrote in the Epilogue of *Australia's Home* (1968):

Thus for the first time a genuine architectural circumspection was brought within the financial reach of the average owner ... Among the more notable enterprises was ... a firm called Merchant Builders in Melbourne, which offered various designs of the architect Graeme C. Gunn (cited in Quilford 2016).

The firm's designs promoted:

... an emerging aesthetic of low-profile buildings in the landscape, the zoning of family living, indoor-outdoor links, passive energy features and a 'natural' palette of colours and tonings and native planting, introduced by landscape designer Ellis Stones (Gartner 2012:451).

Initially, the company was closely associated with architect Graeme Gunn, who was the sole consultant architect until 1969 (Gartner 2012:451). Gunn's project house designs included the 'Terrace', the 'Studio', the 'Courtyard', the 'Cellar' and the 'Two Storey' (O'Callaghan & Pickett 2012:138). In 1969 the company also offered 'special houses', one-off designs that were sometimes based on a design from the project-housing range (O'Callaghan & Pickett 2012:139).

Later architects that worked with the company were Peter Carmichael, Daryl Jackson, Charles Duncan, David McGlashan, Terry Dorrough, Barry Gray, Leo de Jong and Peter Sandow. The company was also associated with landscape and interior designers such as Nexus and Tract (Gartner 2012:451). A key innovation of the firm was the cluster housing subdivisions of 'Elliston' in Rosanna (1969), 'Winter Park' in Doncaster (1970-75) and 'Vermont Park' in Vermont (1976) (Gartner 2012:451).

Merchant Builders' houses were marketed across south-eastern Australia. The company set new benchmarks for residential architecture in the country, encouraging inclusion of landscape, indigenous planting, site planning and interiors as a total package, which resulted in various architectural, environmental and design awards (Quilford 2016; Gartner 2012:451).

Yencken left Merchant Builders in 1982 and after 1987 Merchant Builders was sold to a series of companies before AV Jennings acquired the company's intellectual property in 1991 (Gartner 2012:451; O'Callaghan & Pickett 2012:144).

Graeme Gunn, architect

Graeme Gunn (1933-) studied architecture at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (1956-1960) and began his career in the office of Grounds, Romberg and Boyd (1960-1962). He established his own practice in 1963, becoming a leading design architect in Australia and a highly influential figure in housing, commercial architecture and planning in Victoria (Trimble 2012:303-4).

In 1965, Gunn became consultant architect to Merchant Builders, working closely with founders David Yencken and John Ridge to develop a range of affordable well-designed houses that responded to site and landscape. Gunn's medium density designs for townhouses and project housing integrated built form with landscape, a strategy developed through close collaboration with landscape designer, Ellis Stones (MSD 2015:21)

While working for Merchant Builders, Gunn, along with Yencken, was influential in establishing the *Cluster Title Act 1974* and *Model Cluster Code 1975*. Gunn left Merchant Builders in the early 1970s, becoming Head of the School of Architecture and Building at RMIT from 1972 to 1982 and also undertook a range of commercial work, including the Plumbers and Gasfitters Employees Union office, Carlton (1968-69), Royal South Yarra

Lawn Tennis Club (1969), Torquay Surf Lifesaving Clubhouse (1970) and the Prahran Market refurbishment (1977-82).

Historical Themes

The place illustrates the following themes as outlined in *Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes*:

- 6 Building towns, cities and the garden state
 - 6.7 Making homes for Victorians

Description

The townhouse development at 17 Sorrett Avenue is located to the northeast of the major intersection of High Street and Glenferrie Road. Various major institutional structures are located to the southeast of the site, which is otherwise surrounded by established residential properties. Nine townhouses are irregularly arranged to the north of a private asphalted laneway that extends from the eastern extent of Sorrett Avenue, and is secured by (later) metal gates with masonry pillars. The private laneway turns south at the eastern boundary to connect with adjacent Chilcote Avenue.

The subdivision pattern is unusual but carefully contrived so that each townhouse reads as a distinct building. Two types of building forms are evident within the development: one being T-shaped in plan with a carport at the bottom (south) of the 'T'; and the other being L-shaped in plan. The three T-shaped townhouses (numbers 2, 5, and 8) are arranged along the private laneway with minimal setback, but are separated by numbers 3 and 6 which are of the alternative (larger) L-shaped plan. Numbers 1, 4 and 7 are of the L-shaped type, but occupy battleaxe sites and are arranged along the northern boundary. Number 9, at the eastern boundary, is the largest of the group and occupies the full width (north to south) of the site.

While differing in scale and siting (for example, some are 3-bedroom and others 4- or 5-bedrooms), the individual townhouses retain the 'overall harmony of form and material' as intended by the architects and are characteristic of the Merchant Builders' aesthetic. They are of pale brown brick construction with contrasting dark-brown painted timber to the fascia, eaves lining, and window and door frames. Flat or skillion roof forms, with profiled metal cladding, feature shallow eaves. Several townhouses are equipped with open fires and in these buildings the chimneys are either simply detailed with a metal cowl and rectangular chimney breasts proud of the wall, or are made of copper and subtly penetrate the roof. Timber beams are typically expressed, such as at the carports, and are painted dark brown (noting some appear to have been overpainted white) and are often paired. Windows are arranged in-plane with one another where they are positioned on ground and first floors, with timber panelling to the spandrels between. The windows themselves are either fixed or awning style, and typically have exaggerated transoms. Doors are similarly detailed and are often integrated into the windowset. Some special windows are also employed, for example as a clerestory or a vertical strip window. Unless recessed within a carport, the townhouse entries are sheltered with a simple cantilevered timber-framed canopy.

The internal space of each townhouse connects at least visually with a private outdoor space; in some cases a courtyard, and others a more expansive yard. Glazing and floor levels are placed and set to enhance this connection. Established trees are located around the boundaries of the site and include *Cupressus* sp. at the southeast corner, two *Eucalyptus* sp. in the northeast and southwest corners respectively, and a large weeping ornamental in the backyard of Number 6. Landscape elements that appear to be contemporaneous with the townhouses include brick-paved paths, terracing, steps and retaining walls, areas of square concrete paving with edges stepping back, and informal garden beds (particularly along the private laneway and at the townhouse entries) featuring lava rock arrangements.



Key Features:

- 9x detached townhouses sharing communal private laneway
- A distinct identity for each individual townhouse based on a T- or L-shaped plan type
- ‘Overall harmony of form and material’, including:
 - pale brown brick and dark-brown painted timber elements
 - building forms to be appreciated in three-dimensions, including skillion- or flat-roofed volumes
 - door and glazing arrangements and detailing
- Visual and physical connections between each townhouse and its setting, with particular focus on these connections to private open space (courtyards, backyards and entries)
- Open carports
- Landscaped setting, including mature trees, private laneway and contemporaneous hard landscaping treatments.

Intactness/Integrity

The townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue retain a high degree of integrity in fabric, form and detail. The townhouses remain highly intact and retain the ability to be understood and appreciated as an example of a 1960s project home townhouse development.

Comparative Analysis

The townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue are of note as a highly intact example of a 1960s townhouse development. Designed by influential building company, Merchant Builders, it is one of a number of townhouse developments that were designed and constructed across Victoria in the post-war period.

From the 1950s, well-known architects such as Robin Boyd, Graeme Gunn and Peter McIntyre began to focus their attention and skills on the concept of affordable homes. Working closely with project builders in an effort to provide lower-cost options, these architects began designing small, deceptively simple houses that offered economical and contemporary options suited to a suburban family lifestyle.

As noted in *Designer Suburbs: Architects and Affordable Homes in Australia* (2012):

The project home was synonymous to many with the embodiment of the ‘Australian dream’, that saw home ownership as the foundation of family life. It became a new cultural phenomenon through the link between affordable construction and architectural ideas representing aspirations about living in suburbia (O’Callaghan & Pickett 2012:vii).

Merchant Builders pioneered the introduction of energy efficient, environmentally friendly, architect designed project homes in Victoria in the 1960s and 1970s. The company’s designs were based on a number of strong design principles which included:

- An integrated relationship between house and site;
- Energy conservation through the application of passive design principles and solar-energy technology;
- Interconnectivity between indoor and outdoor spaces; and
- Simplicity in design (O’Callaghan & Pickett 2012:vii).



The company was particularly invested in increasing density in Melbourne’s inner and outer suburbs without losing the connection with landscape, and promoted the idea that house, interiors, landscape and site should be harmoniously integrated (MSD 2015:61). Their cluster housing projects, which allowed for the free siting of houses and gardens without the rigid requirements of conventional subdivision, promoted this integration of architecture, landscape setting, shared space, native planting, environmental design, construction, interior design and marketing. Merchant Builders’ contribution to cluster developments included grouped housing developments at Yuille Street, Brighton (1967); the subject property at 17 Sorrett Avenue, Malvern (1967), Molesworth Street, Kew (1968); and on a larger scale, Winter Park, Doncaster (1969) (*Towards a New Archive*:9).

While no examples of post-war townhouse developments are included in the Heritage Overlay of the Stonnington Planning Scheme, 17 Sorrett Avenue is one of three townhouse developments designed by Graeme Gunn for Merchant Builders in the postwar period within the City. The other two are:

- 93 Grange Road, Toorak (1968), comprising four townhouses; and
- Kensington Close, 21 Kensington Road, South Yarra (1968-9), comprising eight townhouses.

Characterised by a careful consideration of siting, orientation and the use of natural materials such as exposed brick and stained timber, the townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue are the earliest example of the townhouse typology designed by Merchant Builders within the City of Stonnington. Designed by architect, Graeme Gunn, for the influential project housing company, Merchant Builders, with landscape by Ellis Stones, the townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue are important as a highly intact example of a 1960s townhouse development.

Assessment against Criteria

Following is an assessment of the place against the recognised heritage criteria set out in *Planning Practice Note 1: Applying the Heritage Overlay* (August 2018).

Criterion A: Importance to the course or pattern of our cultural or natural history

The townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue have a clear association with the project homes industry in Victoria in the post-war period. Designed by influential project home building company, Merchant Builders, in 1967, 17 Sorrett Avenue is an early example of townhouse developments which became widespread across Victoria in the late 1960s and 1970s following changes to the *Strata Titles Act 1967*. The townhouses demonstrate the shift towards more affordable housing and higher density living, which characterised suburban development throughout Melbourne in the late-twentieth century.

Criterion D: Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments

The townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue are fine and highly intact representative examples of Modernist suburban housing built in the City of Stonnington in the postwar period. They display typical characteristics of Modernist housing from this period including simple, geometric compositions with low-pitched or flat roof forms, broad eaves, areas of expansive glazing, a neutral colour palette, and the use of “natural” materials such as brick and timber.

Criterion E: Importance in displaying particular aesthetic characteristics

The townhouses at 17 Sorrett Avenue are a well-resolved and carefully-designed example of an architect-designed townhouse development of the 1960s and 1970s. Designed by architect Graeme Gunn for Merchant Builders, the townhouses – comprising a series of low-profile buildings built to simple standardised designs and sited to take advantage of natural light – are set within an integrated landscaped setting and present a picturesque composition of this housing typology.



Grading and Recommendations

It is recommended that the place be included in the Heritage Overlay of the Stonnington Planning Scheme as a locally significant heritage place.

Recommendations for the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (Clause 43.01) in the Stonnington Planning Scheme:

External Paint Controls?	No
Internal Alteration Controls?	No
Tree Controls?	No
Outbuildings or Fences not exempt under Clause 43.01-3?	No
Prohibited Uses Permitted?	No
Aboriginal Heritage Place?	No

Extent of the Recommended Heritage Overlay

To the extent of the property boundary as shown in Figure 10 below.



Figure 10. Recommended Extent of Heritage Overlay

References

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