

Cairo flats

Address 98 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy

Practice Taylor Soilleux & Overend (Best Overend)

Designed 1935

Completed 1936

History & Description Cairo consists of a U-shaped block of 28 bachelor flats, comprising 20 bed-sits and 8 single bed units. It was designed by the noted architect, Best Overend of the architectural practice Taylor, Soilleux and Overend, and built in 1936 by Blease Macpherson & Co.

Overend had worked in London with arch-modernist Wells Coates. On his return to Australia he began writing on the minimum flat concept - an entirely functional living unit with built-in or fold-down furniture and complete with labour saving devices. Cairo flats was designed to illustrate these principles.

The flats sought a distinctive type of accommodation, the custom designed bachelor flat, providing maximum amenity in minimum space for minimum rent. The minimal units were supported by a communal dining room, an in-house meal and laundry service, communal flat to roof space and lockable garages. Cairo established a major break with earlier types of flats in Australia and is significant for introducing the flat to the modernist programme in Australia and for its acknowledgement of the existence of a new, modern way of living. [Extract from NT register]



Cantilevered stair 1951. Photo by Lyle Fowler, SLV

Statement of Significance Cairo is of significance as one of the first examples of a serially organised, minimal flat type in Australia and for its innovative and heroic use of concrete construction. Cairo succinctly encompassed the concerns of a new generation of architects in Australia (N1).

Cairo is significant for the efficiency and modernity achieved in the planning and detailing of its units, for the progressive nature of its housing program and for Overend's heroic use of concrete structure (N2).

Through his regular articles in *The Argus* newspaper, the *Australian Home Beautiful* and other magazines, Best Overend became the arch-publicist of modernism in the 1930s. Arguably no other built example better illustrates his ideas during this period than Cairo flats (N5)



Stair from above 1951. Photo by Lyle Fowler, SLV

Criteria Applicable N1 - Significant Heritage value in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or period of design.
N2 - Significant heritage value in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics
N5 - Having a special association with the life or works of an architect of significant importance in our history.



Drawing by Leonard A Bullen from *RVIA Journal*, July 1936, p 95.



Central courtyard in 1948 [photo: City of Yarra Collection]