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The Canterbury (Flats) 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda West

Rohan Storey has explained that although flats have existed for centuries (usually in cities on confined sites, such as 16th century tenements in Edinburgh's old town), the first flats in Melbourne were rather like private hotels or serviced apartments on the English or American models. Melbourne Mansions (1906, now demolished) in Collins Street were the earliest example here.

Another of this type is Fawkner Mansions (1910), at 250 Punt Road; often said to be the earliest surviving block of flats in Victoria. However, its rooms always shared common bathrooms and now the interiors have been altered. The Majestic, 153 Fitzroy Street (1912) is the earliest surviving relatively intact block containing flats in Victoria. But even in 1912, it's two-room 'flats' shared bathroom facilities: five bathrooms between ten suites; two suites had their own bathrooms and the two front suites on each floor had three rooms, a bathroom and were the only suites with a kitchen. So it was only these two suites that were actually self-contained, a total of ten in the building: these ten self-contained flats are the earliest surviving in Melbourne.

However no architect was involved in the design of the Majestic and it is not an interesting design, (except in its arrangement, with balconies overlooking an open courtyard entered from a broad entrance like an Italian monastery). Its 1912 five-storied verandah facing Fitzroy Street was mostly demolished and replaced with Moderne glazing between brick piers in 1935, when it was all altered for conversion to a private hotel.

There were also semi-detached house pairs (duplexes) at 20 Gurner Street, St Kilda designed by J.J Meagher and at Nelson Square, Simpson Street, East Melbourne, a row of duplexes of one flat to each floor and The Maisonettes, 82 Vale Street, East Melbourne (two duplexes, one above the other). These were all built in 1913 and the duplex at 245 & 245A Barkly Street, St Kilda designed by Richardson and Wood, in 1914. These were either duplexes or 'vertical duplexes'. It seems to me that none of these can really be described as blocks of flats. From the 16th century Edinburgh tenements until the current Building Code of Australia, a flat has been defined as (self-contained) houses built on top of each other.

The Canterbury which was built in mid-1914 and designed by significant architects H.W. & F.B. Tomkins, is probably the earliest substantial block, entirely of self-contained flats, in Melbourne.



The Canterbury Flats, 236 Canterbury Road, St Kilda, 2002

The Canterbury led the deluge: the predecessor of all of the tower blocks of flats in Melbourne. For a miniature tower it is; its verticality proudly flaunted. Further, its Arts and Crafts characteristics are the earliest in this style in St Kilda (12). The Canterbury was soon followed by other multi-storeyed flats: Southwold, 57 Acland Street (1915, but only two flats, one on each floor), then 327-328 Beaconsfield Parade (1915-16) by other important Edwardian architects, Klingender & Alsop. These were built as a pair of flats, one above the other, as a group, dressed in more fully developed Arts and Crafts, as it emerged in St Kilda after the war. There were three further St Kilda blocks of flats in 1917, despite the Great War.

A slightly larger block of flats is the three storied Langham at 95 Grey Street, built in 1919. The architect is not known, but its style is transitional between Edwardian and the Inter-war Freestyle, with an exotic castellated accessible roof, and full height railway viaduct-like round arches. Apparently, accessible roofs were provided in flats such as here, (surely the earliest example?) and at Summerland (15) in the next year, to comply with a City of St Kilda bye-law regarding open space requirement for housing.

Henry William Tomkins and his brother Frank Beauchamp Tomkins founded H.W & F.B. Tomkins Architects around 1894. A hundred years later, in 1992 the firm, now Tomkins, Shaw and Evans, (with Daryl Jackson Pty.Ltd.) completed one of their greatest buildings: the Great Southern Stand at the MCG. Other than the Melbourne Cricket Club, other important recurring clients have been the Herald & Weekly Times and Myer.

The firm has always been aware of the latest architectural developments in America, from the early influence of H.H. Richardson and the Chicago School, well before Walter Burley Griffin arrived in Melbourne from Chicago (3). This was apparent initially in their design for the Victorian Artists' Society, 430 Albert Street (1893), by H.W. Tomkins with Richard Speight which is comparable with the Priory, (refer: 61 Alma Road).

Later commercial designs in Flinders Lane by the Tomkin brothers included Metcalf & Barnard (1901-02) at 145-149, the Tomasetti Building (1905-07) at 277-279, and the Higson Building (1913) at 125-127. The Centreway (Arcade) Building, 259-263 Collins Street (1911-12), the former Commercial Travellers' Association, 318-324 Flinders Street and the former London Stores, 349-357 Bourke Street (1924-25).

Perhaps the Tomkins brothers' most famous work, the Myer Emporium at 314-336 Bourke Street, emerged as a Jazz Moderne approach. Various regional shopping centres followed for Myer and even the exquisite modernist bridge over Little Bourke Street (1963). All this work is commercial; the Canterbury is a rare excursion into domestic design for the firm.

No other work by the Tomkins brothers in St Kilda has been identified, however the *Heritage Study's* authors think that the Rand flats at 29 Marine Parade looks suspiciously like their work; however, the Canterbury is most memorable. Very visible, approaching by train to St Kilda Station, it is a corner building (not sited on a corner), clearly intended to be seen not only from the station, but from the George Hotel, the Grey Street hill and Fitzroy Street.

It is an idiosyncratic design: Edwardian Classical Freestyle in red brick and cement render which clads a compressed clutch of vertical elements, fragmented; a technique more recently used by architects such as Nonda Katsalidis, (11) to fragment the bulk of large buildings, to appear more dynamic, slender and elegant in proportions. A bay window extends upwards as a cute octagonal belvedere tower. Three quarter round corner balconies, now glazed-in, are supported by stubby Ionic columns at the corner. The common stair is concealed, to avoid a tenement appearance. The exterior and interior layouts are intact.

Initial developer of the Canterbury was Mrs Gurney for a cost of £1,531. In mid-1919 a new female owner Mrs M. Wright commissioned the same architects to add a fourth storey, consisting of two, two-roomed flats, and glazing the balconies and relocating the tower roof to the higher level. But after the Great War, building materials were scarce and expensive and the cost had escalated to £5,002 for the single floor only. The tower has concrete mullions to its windows.

Just as observation decks were built on the roof of flats in Toorak, towers were built on St Kilda flats such as the Canterbury, but also Belvedere (10), Aldershot and I.E. Anderson's Avenue Court, Albert Park, to capture bay views.

Note: Two other blocks built in 1914, whose plans are not known are: Victoria House, 214-220 Clarendon Street (eight possibly self-contained flats with a single entrance) and around the corner, Clarendon House, Victoria Parade (unknown plan with single doorway). A comparative study of the floor plans of each of the flats contenders mentioned here would be extremely useful, in this analysis of Melbourne's earliest flats.

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