

VERA KNOX HOUSE

Address	46 Panorama Avenue, Lower Plenty
Significance	Local
Construction Date	1958-60
Period	Postwar
Date Inspected	January 2021



Statement of Significance

What is Significant?

Vera Knox House at 46 Panorama Avenue, Lower Plenty is significant. It was constructed between 1958 and 1960 as a retirement dwelling for Vera (*née* James) Knox, the widow of the artist and businessman William Dunn Knox, by his relative the designer/builder, Alistair Knox. Vera remained at the place until the early 1980s, after which it was sold.

The significant elements are the placement of the house below the level of the front garden and its original footprint, including its gabled roof, exposed rafters, pergola cut out, fascia, ashlar walls and chimney of Mount Gambier limestone, and original timber-framed window walls and sliding doors.

Existing trees enhance the setting of *Vera Knox House*.

Later additions, such as the carport, front gate and rear linked-in pavilion, are not significant.

How is it Significant?

Vera Knox House is of historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Banyule.

Why is it Significant?

Vera Knox House is of historical significance as a noteworthy example of modular design by the acclaimed practitioner and advocate for environmental building, Alistair Knox, between the mid-1950s and early 1960s. The modular approach – stressing standardisation, prefabrication, lightness – adopted by Knox in an effort to professionalise and economise his building/design practice revolved around the employment of a novel postwar product, 'Stramit' (a self-supporting compressed strawboard). Knox carried its 1,200mm (4 feet) width into wall systems, a move that considerably increased the speed and effectiveness of his house-building activities. The place also reflects another strain of unconventional housing (alongside mud-brick residences) that contributed to the postwar reputation of the Lower Plenty, then more associated with Eltham, as a community noted for its creative and 'alternative' dynamics. (Criterion A)

Vera Knox House is of aesthetic significance as a distinctive, generally intact instance of Alistair Knox's shift from his formative mud-brick designs to a regionalised modular idiom, in this case, unusual for the designer in its Miesian expression. It is differentiated from the numerous, more uniform brick/timber dwellings he built across Melbourne during this phase by its wall sections of Mount Gambier limestone, which were apparently salvaged from a demolished dwelling in Bullen connected to the family. Such employment of limestone is likely unique in the municipality. The contrast achieved between the residence's fine timber-framed, street-facing window walls and the hefty, luminous ashlar sections of limestone – filtered through the site's trees – is evocative of natural variations and palettes that Knox's sought to encapsulate in his work. While the careful siting of the low-slung house within the fold of the landform, below the front ground level, is also expressive of his goal of harmonising structure and site, reversing the ascendancy of the built form over the landscape. (Criterion E)

Description

Vera Knox House is situated at an ample setback from Panorama Avenue on a diamond-shaped allotment that slopes markedly to the north. The dwelling is off centre on the property and positioned close to the south boundary. Its large front garden is comprised of a mixture of soil and pine needles and defined by a grove of tall pine trees and mature eucalyptus. These plantings appear to have been present since at least the mid-20th century.

The frontage is unfenced, lined by a bed of *Agapanthus*, and features a timber batten gate flanked by mid-height square limestone pillars with masonry coping. Timber paling fences are present to the sides and rear of the property. A gravelled driveway runs the northern perimeter, leading to a later addition double carport with a skillion-roof (exposed beams) supported by a pair of square limestone pillars in the front and metal poles to the rear. In the south, a brick-paved curved path provides pedestrian access to the dwelling.



View to *Vera Knox House* with gate/limestone pillar right of frame

The single-storey *Vera Knox House* is situated below the level of the front garden, nestling behind the front garden bank on a likely excavated platform (limestone retaining wall, possibly non-original). This aspect of the design is reflective of the interest

shown by its designer, Alistair Knox, in the sensitive integration of structure and site – building within the landscape rather than on top of it. Combined with the stand of front garden trees, this placement also delivers privacy, allowing for the façade of *Vera Knox House* to be predominantly open and glazed. Due to such a siting and screening, views from the public realm to the place are blocked or obscured; as such, this assessment depends partly on real estate photography and an original architectural drawing (see Site-Specific).¹

The original residence has a rectangular footprint and is capped by a low-pitched gabled roof with a large central beam. Initially, the roof was covered in a layer of Malthoid (bituminous felt) and creek gravel over 'Stramit' boards (see below). This finish presumably deteriorated, probably due to UV exposure, and corrugated metal sheeting now clads the roof. Rafters of Oregon timber are exposed and overshoot the walls to provide wide eaves. These are divided in half between a covered section (soffits of plaster sheeting) and an open section, which functions as a cut out pergola closed off by a rebated timber fascia. This arrangement has been lost to the rear (see below), but remains apparent in the façade. Both the ridge beam and rafters continue to be visible within the interior. Ceilings are timber boards, which may not be original (it is unclear whether Knox concealed the Stramit boarding).

The tall limestone pier adjacent to the entrance is non-load bearing and is likely a later addition.

The rear roof plane (east) has been modified by the enclosure of the eave/pergola section, allowing an expansion of living space. The northern half of the pergolas have been covered in glazing, while the primary roof has integrated the southern section. As noted, the original rafters survive and remain interpretable.

A squat slab-like chimney of Mount Gambier limestone punctures the rough centre of the roof, just back from the ridgeline (preserving an unbroken line). Such a siting was a Wrightian-influenced device and read as 'anchoring' the building to the landform.



Roof of *Vera Knox House* viewed from the south, across the front garden of no 44

¹ '46 Panorama Avenue, Lower Plenty', realestate.com.au, December 2012, www.realestate.com.au/property/46-panorama-ave-lower-pleasant-vic-3093; and Alistair Knox Collection, *V Knox House, Lower Plenty*, 1958, RMIT Design Archive, Box 3, Job 212 – note only one sheet was archived.

Vera Knox House is of timber-frame and masonry construction with a concrete-on-ground slab (fairly novel for a domestic building in Melbourne at the time). Original walls are formed by ashlar sections of Mount Gambier limestone and window walls. Purportedly, this limestone was reclaimed from a demolition site in Bullen (see Site-Specific) and re-used at the site. Such activity was not unusual for Knox, who one of Victoria's leading exponent of architectural salvage/integration, although it was less routine in this stage of his building career.



Close-up of the façade (west elevation), showing limestone ashlar section of wall

The façade (west) is largely intact, although a small southern section – once enclosed with flywire (see south elevation below) – has been enclosed with later addition sheeting of some kind. Original components are the broad section of Mount Gambier limestone and extensive window wall. The latter is comprised of slender timber-frames with each window module divided into three units; a thin fixed toplight, central fixed or casement window, and lower spandrel of fixed clear glazing.



North and west (façade) elevations of *Vera Knox House* with the carport left of frame

It is likely that all original timber frames at the place – almost certainly Oregon – were produced at a joinery workshop operated from the rear of Knox's second family home in York Street, Eltham.²

Initially, the east elevation largely mirrored the façade, although its lower spandrel was some type of opaque or textured panel ('sclia', sp), and it also incorporated a solid timber door. This wall was removed during later alterations to the eaves/ pergola. However, it seems likely that the original limestone section was re-used within the new external wall, as there is a return of ashlar masonry at the southeast corner. The remainder of this new wall is either weatherboard or glazing.

The north elevation was originally recessed with the oversailing section of gable creating an informal verandah. This arrangement has been partly lost in the eastern half, where the former verandah has been enclosed with timber-framed glazing. As part of this modification, it appears that the original central section of the Mount Gambier limestone wall, while entirely or largely retained, was extended outwards (with limestone) and given a short return to the west. Internally, some of this limestone seems to have been rendered or sheeted over. The west timber-framed sliding door and full-height window (exact unit breakdown as façade) appear to have been replaced by a contemporary door and corrugated metal sheeting. Nonetheless, the module nature of this small section remains interpretable. These same components in the east may have been retained and re-used as part of the extension, as they appear evident adjacent to the later addition return of the limestone wall.

The original south elevation featured a central section of Mount Gambier limestone with timber partition walls or window walls on either side. It faced a concrete verandah floor initially encased with flywire (likely to create a 'sleep out'). The latter has been removed and replaced with an undetermined walling. The previously external limestone wall is now an internal partition.

Set back from the rear elevation of the original house is a gabled pavilion addition linked via a short-glazed passageway. Its construction date is not known but occurred at least after 1975.³ Of note is that the pavilion echoes the design of *Vera Knox House*, including the employment of exposed timber rafters, limestone walls and pillars, and window walls. Such an aesthetic raises the possibility that Knox (active until 1980) or one of his pupils/collaborators may have had a hand in its erection. It also is conceivable that the limestone used in this addition (and elsewhere at the site) came from leftover Mount Gambier blocks from the original salvage, which could have been stored on-site.

The initial floor plan of *Vera Knox House* largely remains; however, it is now less legible because of the provision of additional living space in the east, including a new ensuite, washroom, laundry and kitchen, and deletion of the original bathroom (to provide for a central passageway). Floors were identified as cork, concrete or earth on the original floor plan but are now chiefly glazed bricks in a herringbone pattern (such a finish was utilised at other Knox projects). The living room remains dominated by a substantial ashlar partitioning wall and fireplace (note curved brick back), both of Mount Gambier limestone. Timber mantle and pilasters to the fireplace may be later additions.

Rear yard timber decking, steps, in-ground pool and other built elements are non-original.

By the mid-1950s, Knox had completed several idiosyncratic mud-brick houses. However, he had grown increasingly wary of the high labour costs of adobe and other inherent difficulties. From this period, Knox pivoted to a more straightforward, modular design mode utilising traditional and novel materials, which allowed for smaller professional building crews (as opposed to his eccentric friends) and more cost-effective construction. Within his career, this approach is recognisable as his second building phase and lasted until the early 1960s, after which he again took up mud brick.

Knox's family home in York Street, Eltham (1956-58, since largely demolished) was his opening experiment in modular building. From this project stemmed an array of elements that came to characterise his second phase: slab-on-ground construction, 1200mm (4 foot) wall modules, expressed frame, window walls, limited junctions detailing, and pared-down details.⁴ Such elements are pronounced at *Vera Knox House* as well as in the dwellings he prepared for Dome Construction at the innovative 'Hillcrest Estate' in Donvale (1959-61).

Underpinning Knox's newfound preference for the modular method was Stramit, a new-fangled proprietary material manufactured in Melbourne from 1955.⁵ It was a compressed and rigid self-supporting strawboard, impregnated with various

² 'Design and Building Career', *Biography*, Alistair Knox Foundation, available online, <https://alistairknox.org/>

³ 1975 aerial photograph of the subject place, Landata, Run 24A, Frame 147 – not included in citation

⁴ Richard Peterson and Bohdan Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, vol 4, no 1, 2014, p11

⁵ Stramit was invented during the early 1930s in Sweden. Its name derives from the Swedish word for straw. (Miles Lewis, '5.11 Building Boards', *Australian Building: A Cultural Investigation*, available online)

fabric (paper, hardboard, aluminium foil), which came in sheets 1.2m (4 feet) wide that were easily fixable to rafters. Like other designer/builders, Knox took advantage of the insulating strawboard from the Stramit system for rapid and economical roof installation. Less typically, he often covered it – as at *Vera Knox House* – with Malthoid matting and creek gravel (a more organic finish). The width of the Stramit boards informed the modularity of Knox's second phase and was carried through to the vertical components, such as window walls and doors.⁶ It is not known whether any Stramit element remains at the place.



Melbourne advertisement for Stramit
(Source: Age, 11 November 1963, p9)

The lightweight, more overtly modernist character of Knox's second phase houses was a departure from the heavy-set, rough, individualistic aesthetic of his preceding (and future) work in mud brick. Yet despite the more uniform appearance of the modular houses, most – like *Vera Knox House* – demonstrated his Wrightian/organic/modernist interest in responsive siting/orientation, natural light, indoor/outdoor flow, and minimalistic detail. Their generous glazing, often street-facing, can also be interpreted as Miesian influenced. These buildings epitomise an economical and valid attempt at engagement with a regionalised reading of the postwar modern movement. The underlying principles of Knox's second phase carried over into his later work, even as he returned to adobe, which solidified over the late 20th-century into his individualised philosophy of environmental building.

Separating *Vera Knox House* from the broader stream of timber and brick modular designs prepared by Knox during this period (around 40 a year) is its employment of Mount Gambier limestone. Such material is rare within Knox's work, reflecting its expense as a high-quality prestige stone (and bolstering the fact that it was reclaimed). The other key, known limestone Knox example, was erected around the same time as the subject building in the Hillcrest Estate (68 Lisbeth Avenue, Donvale), although its ratio of stone to window wall is reversed. The most notable use of Mount Gambier limestone in the wider district is *Heide II* at Bulleen (1964-67), a much-admired modernist design by the architect David McGlashan of McGlashan Everist.

⁶ 'Design and Building Career', *Biography*, Alistair Knox Foundation, available online, <https://alstairknox.org/>

History

Context

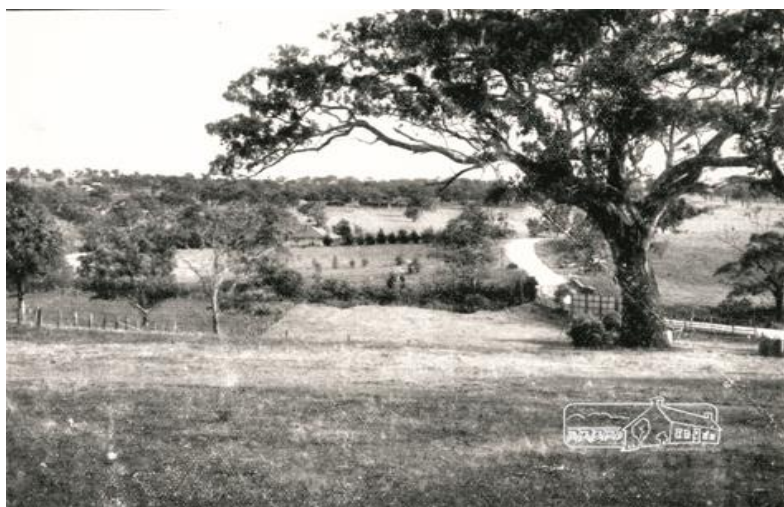
The City of Banyule covers the unceded Country of the Wurundjeri-William people, who inhabited and managed the landscape for millennia and remain culturally connected. The fertile confluence of the Plenty River and the Yarra River/*Birrarung* and adjoining stringy-bark forests hosted squatters from 1837 and was soon after referred to as the 'Lower Plenty'. Much of this area had been alienated by the close of the decade and considered to be of better quality than land elsewhere in the Parish of Nillumbik.⁷

Sizable land parcels and absentee owners predominated over the 19th century, with a small community of tenant farmers responsible for clearing the emergent locality. The rough track linking Heidelberg and the Village of Eltham, which passed through the Lower Plenty, was proclaimed a road in 1840 (now Old Eltham Road), and the Plenty River bridged two years later.⁸ The present-day Main Road (initially called Eltham Road) was laid in 1869.⁹

More intensive subdivision followed in the wake of the First World War, although the locale remained sparsely populated and a 'semi-suburban and rural area' into the 1950s.¹⁰ Reminiscing about the postwar years, Alistair Knox described cycling through the area, alongside the émigré architect Frederick Romberg, describing the Lower Plenty at that stage as a 'wide undulating ... savannah landscape' dotted with 'Primeval redgums of enormous size'.¹¹ The suburb's geographic connection with and administration by the District (later Shire) of Eltham meant that the Lower Plenty was also shaped by the vibrant, vigorous, environmentally-conscious community that materialised in postwar Eltham.¹² From the late 1940s, mud-brick dwellings (built or influenced by Knox) arose (alongside conventional houses) as well as other designs that displayed a clear organic/regional expression:

Twelve miles from Melbourne, the ... [Lower Plenty] is still largely covered with scrub gums and since the housing is nearly all contemporary, the natural appearance of the locality has not been obliterated. More often than not, the modern house has been built to blend, rather than stand apart from its surroundings.¹³

From the early 1960s, residential development was prominent, as was a fashion towards substantial, up-market houses situated on largescale allotments. Open spaces and a general natural/rustic setting remain prevalent throughout Lower Plenty, with a peri-rural feel remaining predominant in its southern reaches.



Photograph from a land sale brochure showing the rural landscape west from the old Lower Plenty Bridge, dated 1920s
(Source: Eltham District Historical Society, *Victorian Collections*, 00180)

⁷ 'Nillumbik' may stem from the Indigenous word *nyilumbik*, meaning 'bad, stupid or red earth'. (Jill Barnard, 'Nillumbik Shire', *eMelbourne*, School of Historical & Philosophical Studies, The University of Melbourne, July 2008, available online; and Context, *Banyule Thematic Environmental History*, October 2018, pp15-20, available online)

⁸ The Plenty River was named in 1835 by Joseph T Gellibrand. Its designation as a river was more warranted before the formation of the Yan Yean Reservoir in the mid-19th century, which reduced its flow. Hoddle referred to it as the 'Yarra Rivulet'.

⁹ The 1843 bridge was replaced in 1865 by the existing 'Old Lower Plenty Bridge' (HO106).

¹⁰ Alan Marshall, *Pioneers & Painters: One Hundred Years of Eltham and its Shire*, Thomas Nelson, 1971, p84

¹¹ Alistair Knox, *We Are What We Stand On: a personal history of the Eltham Community*, Adobe Press, 1980

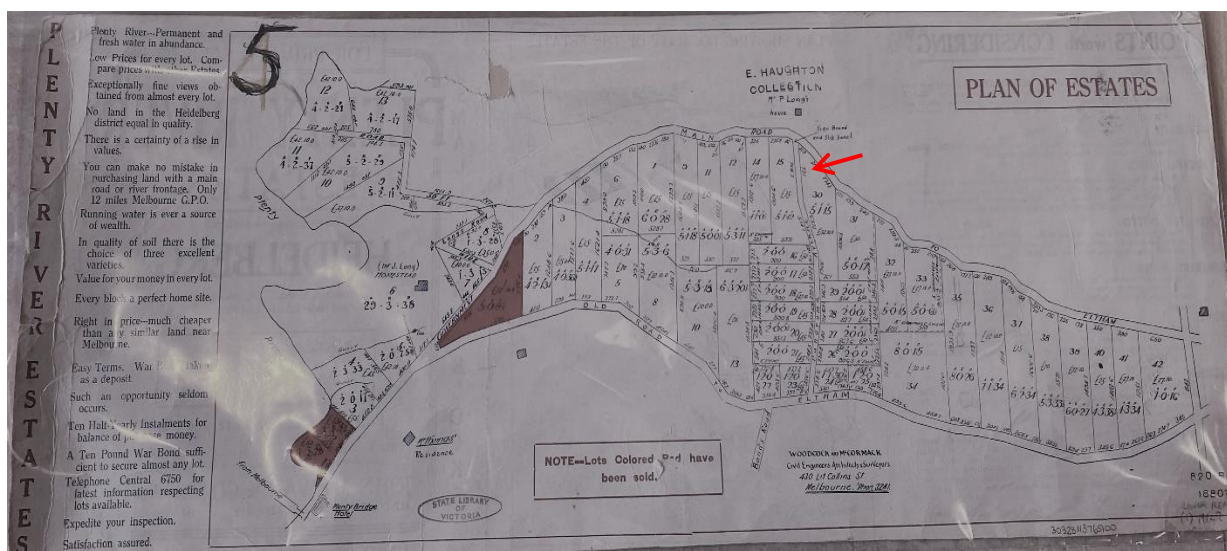
¹² The Lower Plenty and Montmorency were transferred to the newly formed City of Banyule in 1994. ('Lower Plenty', *Victorian Places*, 2014, available online; and Andrew Lemon, 'Lower Plenty', *eMelbourne*, The University of Melbourne, July 2008, available online; and Context, BTEH, p37)

¹³ Rick Campbell, 'Suburban Living, but with hills and bush', *Age*, 9 November 1968, p23.

Site-specific

The subject land derives from the roughly 384-hectare purchase (Portion 2, Parish of Nillumbik) made in 1840 by the Corkonian, Benjamin Baxter.¹⁴ He had arrived in Sydney Town in 1837 as a Captain in the 50th (Queen's Own) Regiment of Foot, charged with escorting a convict transport. Sensing opportunities in the embryonic Port Phillip District, Baxter acquired a Depasturing Licence, ran cattle at Emerald Hill and St Kilda, and held various civil appointments. Around the time Baxter procured his estate in what became the Lower Plenty and Montmorency, he also established a 6,000-hectare pastoral run known as *Carrup Carrup* at Baxter's Flat (Baxter), which became his permanent residence.¹⁵ In 1927, a large part of Portion 2 was acquired for use by the Heidelberg Golf Club.¹⁶

In 1869, the northern three-quarters of Portion 2, including the subject land, was acquired by the affluent Scot and pastoralist, Doctor Robert Martin (onetime occupant of *Viewbank Homestead* and owner of the *Banyule Estate*).¹⁷ Following Martin's death in 1874, the holding passed in toto through several hands. In 1919, the parcel – bound mainly by the Main Road (north), Old Eltham Road (south) and Bolton Street (east) – was brought by George Guthrie McColl, a wealthy Bendigo resident.¹⁸ McColl's intentions appear speculative and his purchase, carved up into sizeable blocks, was promoted for sale that year as the Plenty River Estates – 'Lovely Week-End Blocks', 'suitable [for] cultivation (with irrigation), poultry, fruit growing or nursery'.¹⁹ As part of this subdivision, Panorama Avenue was established, although it remained an 'unmade road ... in a bad state' into at least the 1930s.²⁰



Plenty River Estates, 1919

The approximate location of the subject land, part of lot 30, is indicated by the red arrow
(Source: SLV)

By 1937, the Investors Land and Finance Corporation Pty Ltd had purchased about 5 hectares on the north-eastern side of Panorama Avenue, re-subdividing it into more suburban-scaled lots, chiefly to the newly established Philip Street (originally, Elizabeth Street).²¹ This action included the pegging out of the subject lot, no 20. Its unusual triangular shape a quirk of the surrounding subdivision pattern and street layout. Multiple transactions followed.²² In December 1957, Vera Knox purchased lot 20, then thickly wooded with regrowth (see below).²³

Vera (née James) (1891-1982) was the widow of William Dunn Knox (1880-1945), a 'distinguished member of the art and

¹⁴ Refer to *Plan of the Parish of Nillumbik*, Office of Lands and Survey, 1866, SLV, available online

¹⁵ 'Death of Captain Baxter: An Old Colonist and Pioneer', *Mornington Standard*, 19 May 1892, p3; and Marshall, *Pioneers & Painters*, pp82-4

¹⁶ *Heidelberg Golf Club*, 'History', available online

¹⁷ Certificate of Title, vol 289, folio 706

¹⁸ 'Lieut.-Colonel G. G. McColl', *Argus*, 15 June 1938, p11; and Certificate of Title, vol 233, folio 523

¹⁹ 'Advertising', *Herald*, 16 September 1912, p7; and 'Advertising', *Age*, 19 February 1919, p4

²⁰ 'Lower Plenty Progress Association', *Advertiser* [Hurstbridge], 7 March 1930, p4

²¹ Certificate of Title, vol 6145, folio 934

²² Certificate of Title, vol 6755, folio 863

²³ Certificate of Title, vol 8164, folio 440

business world' and founding member of the Australian Academy of Art.²⁴ Vera herself was also artistically interested and informed and had a particular eye for ceramics.²⁵ In the wake of her husband's death, she had remained at the substantial Arts & Crafts-style bungalow in Heidelberg/Eaglemont that William and Vera had commissioned in 1924 (still in existence, 16 Mount Street). She purchased the Lower Plenty property in her mid-sixties with the intention of a relaxed retirement. Such a goal likely explains the relatively small scale of the original footprint and the intimate nature of its internal plan.



1956 aerial photograph of the undeveloped subject place, approximate location indicated by the red star
(Source: Landata, Project 2, Run 16A, Frame 53)

Vera engaged the then locally well-established designer/builder Alistair Knox (see below), who was well-known to her as a relative of her late husband.²⁶ Knox himself was probably familiar with the setting of Vera's property, having designed and constructed his first mud-brick building, *English House*, nearby at 50 Philip Street. At least one plan was produced by Knox's building company, 'Alistair Knox Pty Ltd', in January 1958, which is reproduced below. Vera was in occupation by 1960.²⁷

The Mount Gambier limestone utilised for the walls of *Vera Knox House* was reputedly recovered from a large postwar house connected with the Knox family in what is now Bullen, near the intersection of Banksia and Bridge streets.²⁸ Such an exercise in salvage and re-use was core work for Knox, particularly over the 1960s and 1970s:

There is a spirit in re-used materials in the same way as there is poetry in some words, which when we use them recall other scenes. It's not corny. It's elemental experience and the stuff of life.²⁹

The retrieval of the limestone from a site meaningful to the Knox family makes sense from a cost/practicability perspective. As a high status and costly material – imported by local agents from Victoria's border with South Australia – it would seem an unusual choice for even a well-off widow's retirement home in the placid Lower Plenty.

²⁴ Knox was the Manager of the Eagle and Globe Steel Company Ltd. His output of impressionist landscape artwork, while modest, is critically well-considered. (Allom Lovell & Associates, *Banyule Heritage Place Study: An Urban History*, vol. 1, July 1999, pp282-4; and 'Mr. William D. Knox', *Age*, 18 June 1945, p6)

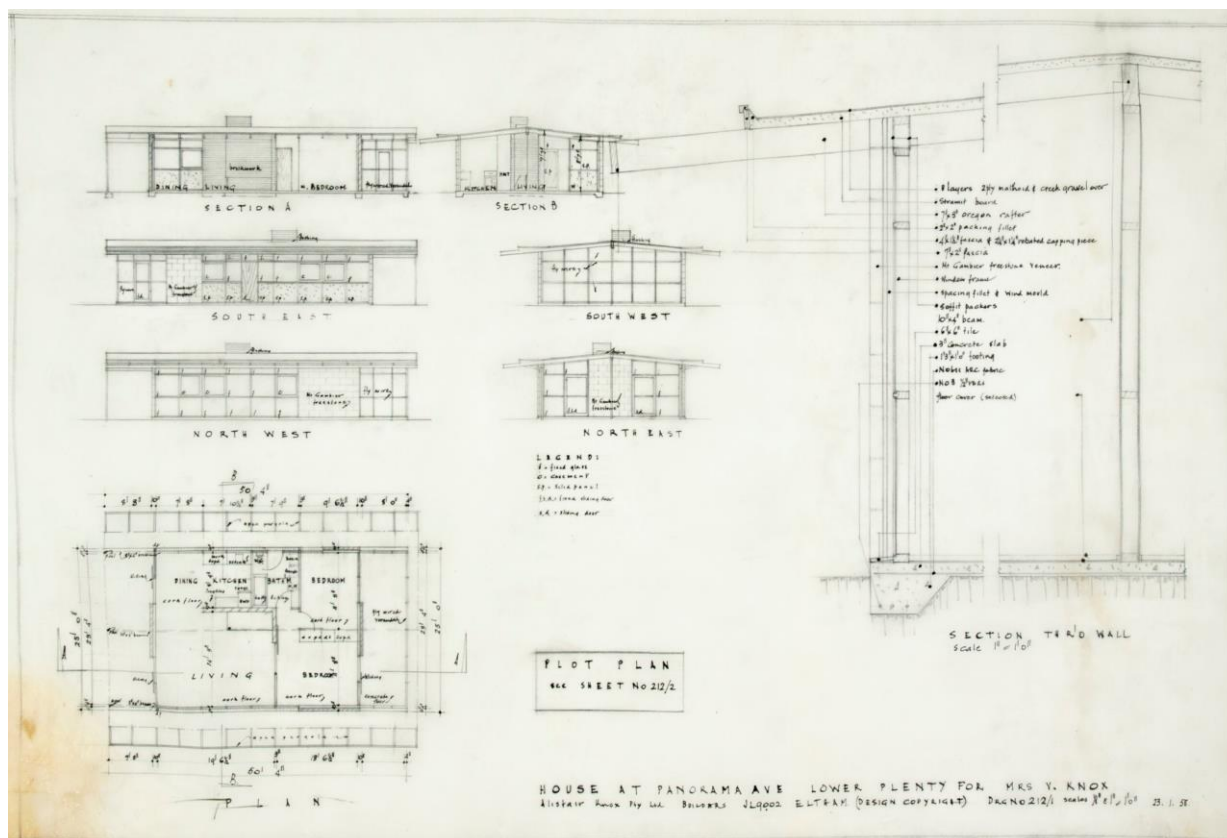
²⁵ Personal correspondence with Edward family, March 2021

²⁶ William D Knox was the brother of Alistair Knox's father, Arthur Jean Francois Knox.

²⁷ 1960 Victorian electoral roll, Division of Deakin, Subdivision Eltham, p75

²⁸ Personal correspondence with Edward family, April 2021

²⁹ Knox, Alistair Knox, *Living in the environment*, Mullalya, 1978, chapter 67, available at the Alistair Knox website, <https://alistairknox.org/chapters/67>



Original footprint, elevations and wall sections

(Source: Alistair Knox Collection, *V Knox House, Lower Plenty*, 1958, RMIT Design Archive, Box 3, Job 212)

The 'alternative' and creative milieu that emerged in the Eltham area – a 'sleepy outer suburb surrounded by remnant bush' – over the postwar period also proved important in allowing for experimentation and engagement with earth structures.³⁰ In the aftermath of the war, the presence of affordable land in the locale (in which the Lower Plenty was included) and its semi-rural surroundings drew those interested in living 'simpler' lifestyles (many apparently influenced by Thoreau's *Walden*). Writers, artists, filmmakers, designer and others continued to head to Eltham after the war: 'We were young, enthusiastic idealists, keen to avoid becoming Thoreau's "men who lead lives of quiet desperation".'³¹ Many of these new residents were interested in unconventional construction techniques or turned to them by necessity.

By the late 1950s, the 'alternative' and creative reputation of the Eltham area, was well-entrenched. Reminiscing, Knox often lionised the locale in this era:

The Shire of Eltham has achieved a remarkable reputation as a district of artists, writers, environmentalists and other eccentric inhabitants during the past forty years. It has gradually become recognised as the most creative local community in Australia. At the end of the Second World War, polite Melbourne still regarded it as a place of non-confirming fringe dwellers who lived in dubious artists' colonies, drank large quantities of dry red wine, built mud-brick houses and opposed all forms of civic progress and suburban development. It fought running battles with the State Electricity Commission and other authorities over the retention of indigenous, roadside tree growth and formed societies to promote the unrestrained and promiscuous planting of native trees at a time when there were still persona non grata in other localities.³²

Vera Knox retained ownership of the place until her death in 1982. Her family sold it a couple of years later.³³

³⁰ Gordon Ford in Ford with Gwen Ford, *Gordon Ford: the natural Australian garden*, Blooming Books, 1999, p9

³¹ Ford, *Gordon Ford: the natural Australian garden*, p9

³² Alistair Knox, *Alternative Housing: Building with the head, the heart and the hand*, Albatross Book, 1980, chapter 'The Mount Pleasant Road Story', available at <https://alistairknox.org/chapters/90>

³³ Certificate of Title, vol 8164, folio 440



1963 aerial photograph of *Vera Knox House* (red circle), enveloped by trees
(Source: Landata, Project 4, Run 6, Frame 125)

Alistair Samuel Knox (1912-86)

... it is difficult to establish whether Eltham made Knox or whether he was the making of it – of mud bricks and sturdy timbers ...³⁴

A charismatic figure, Alistair Knox was the leading proponent of Victoria's postwar mud-brick 'revival', an ardent movement that became entwined with a specific Eltham-based identity and a broader rise of eco-consciousness. Through his postwar building and landscape work and his writing and activism, Knox was instrumental in popularising the concept of 'environmental building' over the late 20th century.³⁵

Knox, born and raised in Melbourne by an evangelical family, started a clerkship with the State Savings Bank of Victoria in his late teens and a family soon after. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the Volunteer Defence Corps, ultimately serving on the waters around Papua New Guinea. Discharged in 1945, Knox took advantage of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme to begin, but not complete, a Diploma of Architecture and Building Construction at Melbourne Technical College. Weary of the bank, his postwar ambitions turned to building and design.

³⁴ Anne Latreille, 'Awards for know-how and a flair for original', *Age*, 14 September 1982, p23

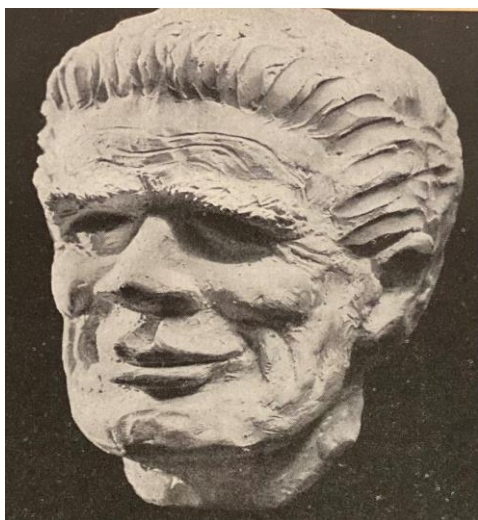
³⁵ Peterson and Kuzyk, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place', p5; Fay Woodhouse, 'Knox, Alistair Samuel (1912-1986)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 2007, available online; and Philip Goad, 'Knox, Alistair', in Goad and Julie Willis, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Australian Architecture* Cambridge University, 2012, pp387-8

Over the late 1940s, Knox – his first marriage having broken down – began circulating within Melbourne’s avant-garde/bohemian circles. He made regular forays out to Eltham to visit *Montsalvat*, experiencing the complex’s array of adobe/pisé buildings. The ‘primitive’ aesthetic and harmonising qualities of earth construction drew Knox, although his first two commissioned houses, both in the Glenard Estate (Eaglemont) in 1946, were of weatherboard. The public interest in the completion of the mud-brick *English House* (1947) encouraged Knox to quit the bank and embark on a string of adobe projects. He relocated permanently to Eltham in 1949, marrying Margot (née) Edwards, a well-known painter, in 1954. Knox became a fixture of postwar Eltham, a place and community he considered unparalleled within Australia.³⁶

Knox’s four-decade career in building and landscape design/construction was prolific despite commercial ebbs and flows. It is loosely dividable into four phases. The first, a pared-back, heavily organic, mud-brick phase, was characteristic between the late 1940s to the mid-1950s. The second phase witnessed the adoption of a modular design approach, with low-key modern houses utilising more conventional materials and new products, such as ‘Stramit’. The ‘credit squeeze’ of 1960/61, instigated a return to mud-brick and reclaimed materials, albeit the designs remained generally modular (third phase). From the early 1970s (fourth phase), a sequence of mature and dramatic adobe and landscape projects was initiated, which coincided with the peak of Knox’s public profile and the wider resurgence of earth construction in Eltham.³⁷ Underlying the various phases was a deep appreciation of the subtlety of the Australian landscape – the embrace of a site’s sense of place and exigencies – and consistent engagement with the principles of the modern movement.

Knox’s interests in environmental design and social concerns both mirrored and drove a broader escalation of conservation politics, particularly in Victoria, where he became a household name over the 20th century. Between 1973 and 1975, Knox served on Eltham Shire Council, including as president in his last year. He was also a founding member (1967) and later fellow (1983) of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects. In 1984, Knox received an honorary Doctor of Architecture from the University of Melbourne for his unique contributions to the field of design.

The breadth of Knox’s influence was notable: ‘His work was key to the next generation of builders and designers, including John Pizzey, artist Clifton Pugh, architects Morrice Shaw and Robert Marshall and countless owner builders [particularly in the Eltham area].’³⁸ The Alistair Knox Park in Eltham, which he assisted in converting from a rubbish tip in the mid-1970s, is dedicated to him.



Clay caricature of Alistair Knox, 1953, by John Frith
(*Australian Home Beautiful*, January 1953, p14)



Clay bricks in production, undated, unspecified site
(Source: Alistair Knox, *Living in the environment*, 1978)

Thematic Context

Context, *Banyule Thematic Environmental History*, October 2018:

- Theme 5: Suburban development

³⁶ Knox, *We are what we stand on*, xiii and p47

³⁷ Peterson and Kuzyk, ‘Alistair Knox (1912-1986): modernism, environment and the spirit of place’, passim; and ‘Design and Building Career’, *Biography*, Alistair Knox Foundation, available online, <https://alistairknox.org/>

³⁸ Goad, ‘Knox, Alistair’, p338

See also Allom Lovell & Associates, *Banyule Heritage Place Study: An Urban History*, vol 1, July 1999:

- 6.4 Post-War Residential Development

Comparative Analysis

Knox's practice was responsible for approximately 1,260 buildings, principally houses. The majority of his mud-brick projects are now situated in Nillumbik Shire, predominantly in Eltham, Kangaroo Ground, and Diamond Creek. The presence of a small cluster of his first phase projects in the Lower Plenty and Montmorency – now part of Banyule – reflects these areas' associations with the former Shire of Eltham, the 'cradle' of mud brick and environmental design in Melbourne during the second half of the 20th century. Another score or so of Knox's houses, chiefly dating from the 1960s and 1970s, survive elsewhere in Banyule; however, while often distinct within their immediate settings, these places generally present as more typical, even conventional, examples of his second and later phases of work.³⁹ There are no other instances of limestone walls known in Banyule.

The only known example of Knox's work in the municipality affected by a HO is:

- *Brynning House*, 37 Glenard Drive, Eaglemont (part of the Walter Burley Griffin Glenard Estate, HO1) – a restrained gable-roofed, U-shaped, timber house, Knox's first commercial project, built in 1946.⁴⁰ Since modified.

Two other earlier instances of Knox's work in Banyule have been recommended for a HO by this Study:

- *English House*, 50 Philip Street, Lower Plenty – Knox's first mud-brick project, an austere and small skillion-roofed residence, constructed in 1947. It was subsequently extended and altered, although its principal elements remain intact and interpretable. Indicative of Knox's first phase, albeit in a compact manner.
- *Lindsay Edward House*, 149 Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty – a large flat-roofed mud-brick split-level with uncommon U-shaped, 'butterfly' plan, built between 1950 and 1952 for the artist Lindsay Edward. The most architecturally accomplished example of Knox's adobe work in the municipality.

In Banyule, a small group of architect-designed houses included in the Schedule of the Heritage Overlay or recommended for a HO by this Study reflect the organic/Wrightian and regionalist strain of modernism in which Knox practised.⁴¹ These places, dating from the late 1950s and 1960s, are relatively substantial and highly designed examples of a minority strain of progressive contemporary design that sought to respond to the local landscape and environmental conditions more explicitly than internationally-minded rationalist modernism. However, *Vera Knox House* is an example of a more unassuming, modular version of this effort, one likely more accessible to different income brackets and, in this case, differentiated by its employment of recycled limestone.

Intactness

Generally intact

Previous Assessment

- RBA Architects + Conservation Consultants, *Banyule Heritage Study 2020: Stage 1 report*, Banyule City Council, August 2020 – High priority, recommended for Stage 2

Heritage Overlay Schedule Controls

External Paint Controls	Yes (limestone walls)
Internal Alteration Controls	No

³⁹ For instance: 43 Alexander Street, Montmorency (mud brick construction, façade of random stone cladding, 1950s); 30 Gilbert Road, Ivanhoe (courtyard house, mud-brick, carport modified); Sunday School Hall for St Andrews Church at 1-3 Mountain View Road, Montmorency (1955); 8 Rowell Street, Rosanna (1960s brick house with an International Style expression); and *Fowler House*, 60 Adam Crescent, Montmorency (late 1970s mud brick). See Alistair Knox website, section 'Buildings', <http://alistairknox.org/directories/2>

⁴⁰ Knox was also behind the *Moore House* on Glenard Drive (since demolished) – a flat roofed, timber building with a U-shaped footprint which enabled the retention of pre-existing trees, with extensive glazing and a stone paved patio.

⁴¹ *V Walker House*, 209 Main Road, Lower Plenty (HO163), 1958; and *Williams House*, 4 Glenard Drive, Eaglemont (HO146), 1963; and *Elliston Estate*, Rosanna (HO92), late 1960s. Recommended by this Study – *Okalyi House*, 66 Old Eltham Road, Lower Plenty, 1968-70; *Yann House*, 21 Keam Street, Ivanhoe East, 1960-63; and *Welsh House*, 4 Eton Court, Heidelberg, 1965-72

Tree Controls	No
Outbuildings and/or fences	No

Extent of Heritage Overlay

The proposed extent of the heritage overlay is outlined approximately below.



Recommended extent of heritage overlay
(Source: Nearmap, November 2020)