

Vera Knox House Statement of Significance

Heritage Place: 46 Panorama Avenue, Lower Plenty | **PS ref no:** HO217



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 local 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 trees at the site – is evocative of natural variations and palettes that Knox 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)

Primary source

Banyule Heritage Study 2020 (RBA Architects & Conservation Consultants)