

English House Statement of Significance

Heritage Place: 50-52 Philip Street, Lower Plenty

PS ref no: HO218



What is Significant?

English House at 50 Philip Street, Lower Plenty is significant. It was constructed in 1947 for returned serviceman, 'Frank' English, to a design by Alistair Knox. The 'foreman' of the building crew was the artist and mud-brick builder Sonja Skipper, then based at *Montsalvat* in Eltham. In the mid-1960s, new owners – the eclarté weavers Edith 'Mollie' Grove and Catherine Hardess/Hardress – engaged Knox to undertake timber additions, extending the dwelling to the west and north as well as providing an additional bay in the east. Around 1996, a new wing was constructed in the west and other alterations occurred, including the rebuilding or recladding of some mid-1960s walls in mud brick.

The significant element is the original (1947) footprint of *English House*, including the skillion profile of its roof, exposed timber beams, broad eaves, adobe chimney and rendered cap, walls and piers of mud brick/adobe, tripartite full-height and triple-leafed French windows (including those relocated), timber lintel (north elevation), original entrance (south elevation), and paved rear patio.

Internally, the mud-brick/corbelled fireplace and inglenook, including benches and timber lintel are also significant.

Later additions are not significant, although the utilisation of mud brick for walling in the circa 1996 development complements the aesthetic of *English House*. The front and rear 'bush style' gardens enhance the setting of the place.

How is it Significant?

English House is of local historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Banyule.

Why is it Significant?

English House is of historical significance as the first mud brick building designed by Alistair Knox, an acclaimed practitioner of environmental building. The construction of *English House* was undertaken by a small amateur crew, including Knox, led by the talented Sonja Skipper, the only person involved in the project with hands-on experience with adobe. Her 'foreman' role was undoubtedly rare in the highly gendered building trade at the time. The small size and frugal/reductive character of

the original *English House* is indicative of key postwar dynamics, especially austerity conditions, building restrictions and the gathering influence of the modern movement. Its mud-brick walls and utilisation of 'bush timber' attest to the problems faced by the aspirational postwar homeowner – a dire shortage of conventional materials. At completion, the small-scale *English House* attracted widespread public attention as a successful experimental model in unorthodox/austerity construction that allowed for a fluid, indoor-outdoor, 'modern' living environment. Such coverage was important in fuelling the wider mud-brick movement over the late 1940s and animating Knox's building career. More broadly, *English House* is illustrative of the emergence of a postwar community in the Lower Plenty area, associated with Eltham at the time, distinguished by its creativity and embrace of 'alternative' environmental living. This aspect is amplified by the long association of the noted eclarté weavers 'Mollie' Grove and Catherine Hardess, who are responsible for much of the tree planting at the property. (Criterion A)

English House is of aesthetic significance as a striking mud-brick design in the municipality, the original core of which remains broadly intact. Alistair's Knox's first attempt at mud-brick building reflects a bold experiment in challenging conditions dictated by lingering wartime rationing and a limited budget. At *English House*, Knox produced an inspired merging of the 'primordial' and robust aesthetic of handwork mud brick and 'bush timbers' with the core tenants of the postwar modern movement, such as careful siting, solar responsivity and a pared-down, 'honest' character. The result was a highly unusual design for the late 1940s, the underlying elements of which came to epitomise his later, influential concept of environmental building (informally, the 'Eltham style'). The bank of elegant timber-framed, triple-leafed French windows, flanked by thick mud-brick piers, are emphatic reflections of Knox's engagement with a then-nascent vein of regionalised Melbourne modernism that continued to evolve over the postwar period. The substantial adobe fireplace and inglenook at the heart of the original footprint is a noteworthy, increasingly rare feature. (Criterion E)

Primary source

Banyule Heritage Study 2020 (RBA Architects & Conservation Consultants)