

Kew Hebrew Congregation, 53 Walpole Street, Kew Statement of Significance

Heritage Place:	Kew Hebrew Congregation, 53 Walpole Street, Kew	PS ref no:	HO559
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Figure 1. View of Bet Nachman Synagogue building from the south-east corner of Walpole and Malmsbury streets. (Source: Context, June 2020)



Figure 2. View of the two-storey school wing from Malmsbury Street. (Source: Context, June 2020)



Figure 3. Entrance to Norman Smorgon House via Malmsbury Street. (Source: Context, June 2020)

What is significant?

The Kew Hebrew Congregation site at 53 Walpole Street, Kew, established in 1949, including several component buildings constructed between 1954 and 1970. The following elements of the site are significant:

- Bet Nachman Synagogue (c.1963-65), including ten stained glass windows designed by Louis Kahan;
- Norman Smorgon House, which comprises the remnant core of an original brick residence (c1886) that was adapted and used as a synagogue from c.1949-63, and the additions dating from 1954 and 1957;
- Classrooms (1959);
- School building facing Malmsbury Street (1966);
- Former caretaker's cottage (c.1970);
- Mature Peppercorn (*Schinus molle*).

The recent additions made to the east, west and north of the school building facing Malmsbury Street are not significant.

How is it significant?

The Kew Hebrew Congregation at 53 Walpole Street, Kew, is of local historical, architectural (representative), social and associative significance and is of rarity value to the City of Boroondara.

Why is it significant?

The site at 53 Walpole Street, Kew, and known as the Kew Hebrew Congregation, is important for its role in the development of Jewish worship, education, language studies, and community and cultural life in the City of Boroondara from 1949. The complex of buildings, which comprises the Bet Nachman Synagogue (c.1963-65); Norman Smorgon House, which comprises the remnant core of an original brick residence (c1886), which was adapted and used as a synagogue from c.1949-63, and added to in 1954 and 1957; classrooms (1959); a double-storey school building facing Malmsbury Street (1966); and former caretaker's cottage (c.1970), together represent the development of a cohesive social, religious and cultural centre of Jewish life in Kew in the postwar period. It is also historically significant for its use as a Jewish day school, serving as the kindergarten and primary school section of Mount Scopus Memorial College, which was located in Burwood, from 1953, and providing a purpose-built school building from 1966. (Criterion A)

The complex at 53 Walpole Street, Kew, known as the Kew Hebrew Congregation and comprising a synagogue, former Jewish day school and Jewish community buildings, is a rare place type in the City of Boroondara and in Victoria more generally. It is a rare intact postwar example of this place type. (Criterion B)

The Bet Nachman Synagogue is architecturally significant as a fine representative example of a postwar Synagogue. Frequently designed by emigre architects who had trained in the ateliers of Europe before the war, these buildings display characteristics of the modernist movement and were seen as symbols of survival and hope to a displaced community looking for a fresh start. Breaking from the traditional forms used for earlier Synagogues that referenced classicism, these buildings used simple cubiform massing with flat roofs and sheer unadorned planar surfaces favoured by the International style. This frequently resulted in buildings that possessed a certain monumentality in form that was lightened by the use of pale brickwork and large horizontal bands of glazing. The Bet Nachman Synagogue is distinguished by its bold use of pre-cast concrete and a steel portal frame that, combined with striking sloped vertical elements and large areas of unbroken wall surfaces, has resulted in a composition that is more indicative of the emerging Brutalist movement of the 1960s than the earlier international style. The school building is architecturally significant as a representative example of an education building designed in the postwar International style. This is evident in its cubiform massing, flat roof, sheer wall planes of pale brickwork and large expanses of glazing, that combine to give a lightness and transparency to the building that is indicative of the style. (Criterion D)

The Kew Hebrew Congregation at 53 Walpole Street, Kew, is significant for its importance as a centre for Jewish worship, Jewish community life (including welfare, social activities, historical records and Hebrew language), particularly for the postwar (Eastern) European Jewish immigrants who came to Melbourne as displaced people following the Second World War. The site as a whole has played an ongoing role in both the spiritual and social life of the Jewish community, locally and across wider Melbourne, since 1949, when the first synagogue was established in the existing Victorian-era house on the site. Norman Smorgon House has served the community for over sixty years as a gathering place for various functions and activities, including for ceremonial observances and rituals from 1949-c.1965 when it was used as a synagogue, as an affiliated kindergarten (with Mount Scopus College) from 1951, and for hosting Shabbat dinners, weddings and school functions up until the present day. The Bet Nachman Synagogue has served the community for over fifty years as a purpose-built place of worship, and as a place where the community's culture and identity is celebrated through the observance of festivals and events throughout the Jewish year and the marking of life cycle events such as births, bar/bat mitzvahs,

weddings and funerals. The school building facing Malmsbury Street, constructed in c.1965-66, has long connections with the Jewish community through its affiliation with Mount Scopus College, as it served as the Kew division of the college until the 1990s. (Criterion G)

The Kew Hebrew Congregation at 53 Walpole Street, Kew, is of significance to the City of Boroondara for its association with notable members of the Melbourne Jewish society, including businessman and philanthropist Norman Smorgon OAM (1884-1956), notable postwar architect, Anthony A. Hayden (1921-1984), and notable artist and Kew resident, Louis Kahan (1905-2002), who designed the ten stained glass windows in the Bet Nachman Synagogue. It is also significant for its association with Jewish teacher and spiritual leader, Rabbi Jacob Schreiber (born c.1920s). Schreiber led the Kew Hebrew Congregation through the period of significant expansion of its operations from the mid-1950s until the 1980s, and was influential in the development of Jewish community life in the postwar period in the City of Boroondara. (Criterion H).

Primary source

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