

CITY OF BOROONDARA

[FORMER] WITHERS HOUSE

32 CORBY STREET, BALWYN NORTH

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

Prepared for
City of Boroondara
14 July 2021



ACN 134 500 115

architectural historians
heritage consultants

TWENTIETH CENTURY SPECIALISTS

PO Box 222 Emerald 3782
phone 8644 5266

www.builtheritage.com.au

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND & BRIEF

This report was commissioned by the City of Boroondara on 25 June 2021 to provide a detailed heritage assessment of the former Withers House at 32 Corby Street, Balwyn North, designed by Alistair Knox in 1962. This follows a preliminary assessment commissioned on 11 June, which took into account the content and findings of two previous assessments: one prepared by Context Pty Ltd on behalf of the City of Boroondara, and another prepared by Bryce Raworth Pty Ltd on behalf of the property's owners. The former concluded that the subject building was of heritage significance at the local level, while the latter maintained an opposing viewpoint.

In reviewing these two reports, and undertaking further assessment as deemed necessary, the preliminary assessment by Built Heritage Pty Ltd concluded that the house did indeed reach the for inclusion on the heritage overlay schedule. As such, it was considered appropriate for the preliminary assessment to be expanded into a detailed assessment.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

In expanding the preliminary assessment into a detailed assessment, the following tasks were undertaken:

- (a) A brief site visit, to inspect and photograph the exterior of the house from the street;
- (b) Additional research into the history of the place, examining sources that had not been consulted for the two reports prepared by others (including contact with the Withers family), in order correct minor factual errors and to fill any gaps in the story;
- (c) Investigation of the archive of landscape designer Peter Glass, in order to confirm whether or not he was responsible for preparing the unattributed garden layout plan;
- (d) Preparing a written description of the building and its landscaped context;
- (e) Additional comparative analysis, expanding on material that had previously consolidated for the preliminary assessment;
- (f) Completing the other standard components of a heritage citation, namely the Assessment by Criteria, Statement of Significance,

Comparative analysis would be informed by reference to the extensive documentation of Alistair Knox's work contained in the website www.alistairknox.org, and by my own extensive knowledge of the study area, derived principally from the prior involvement of Built Heritage Pty Ltd as author of the *Balwyn & Balwyn North Heritage Study* (2015).

1.3 CONCLUSIONS

The case for heritage significance at the local level, which was already considered to be compelling following the preliminary assessment, was considerably bolstered on completion of the present detailed assessment. As such, it is recommended that former Withers House be added to the heritage overlay schedule as an individually significant heritage place.

1.4 AUTHORSHIP

The peer review was completed by Simon Reeves, director and principal of Built Heritage Pty Ltd.



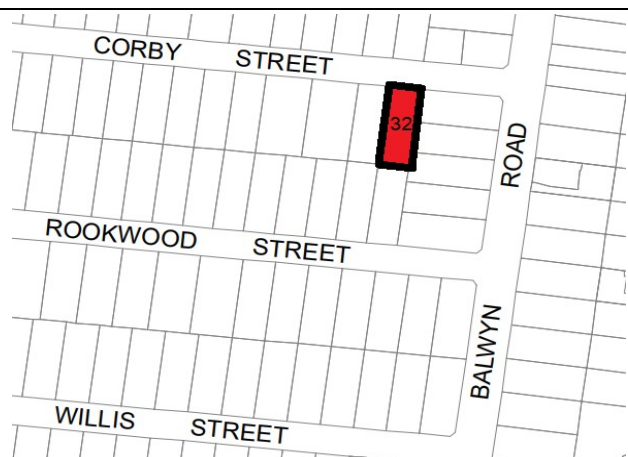
HERITAGE PTY LTD

2.0 DETAILED HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

IDENTIFIER	HOUSE	Citation No	N/A
Other name/s	Withers House	Melway ref	46 E2
Address	32 Corby Street BALWYN NORTH	Date/s	1962 (house) 1963, 1964 (minor additions)
Designer/s	Alistair Knox Pty Ltd (house) Unknown (garden)	Builder/s	Alistair Knox Pty Ltd



Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 30 June 2021



Location map and proposed extent of HO

Heritage Group	Residential building (private)	Condition	Excellent
Heritage Category	House	Intactness	Excellent

Thematic context	6.7 Making homes for Victorians
-------------------------	---------------------------------

Recommendation	Include on heritage overlay schedule as an individual heritage place		
Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> External Paint	<input type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration	<input type="checkbox"/> Trees

2.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The area comprising the present-day suburb of Balwyn North, bounded by Burke Road, Belmore Road, Winfield Road and the Koonung Creek, originally formed part of the vast land holding that was reserved in 1841 as Elgar's Special Survey. Initially settled by viticulturists and wood-carters, the Balwyn North area was served by the nearby Village of Balwyn from the 1870s. While Balwyn proper underwent more intensive residential expansion consequent to the connection of mains water (1880) and the opening of the Outer Circle railway line (1891), Balwyn North would remain sparsely settled into the early twentieth century. Although suburban sprawl burgeoned during the inter-war years, it was not until 1938, after the electric tramway and sewerage mains both reached Balwyn North, that the area became more desirable to prospective homebuilders. Further expansion was hampered by WW2, but a major boom was to commence soon afterwards.

With wartime restrictions on labour and building material relaxed by the early 1950s, Balwyn North became one of Melbourne's most sought-after and swiftly developed post-WW2 suburbs. One of the last remaining expanses of undeveloped land close to the city, it attracted crowds of enthusiastic homebuilders, many of whom engaged leading architects of the day as well as others who turned to builders and burgeoning project house companies. As the suburb rapidly filled out, the residential building boom in Balwyn North gradually abated during the 1960s.

2.2 PLACE HISTORY

2.2.1 The Clients: Percy and Gwen Withers

The house at 32 Corby Street was erected in 1962 for Percy Withers (1898-1981), proprietor of a leading Melbourne transport company, and his wife Gwen (1915-1993). Born in Elmore, near Bendigo, (Alfred) Percy Withers was the youngest son of Arthur Albert Withers (1861-1929), once described as ‘the pioneer of motor coach tours in Victoria’ (*Herald* 17/07/1929:1). From the late 1880s, the elder Withers had worked in Bairnsdale (and later Bendigo) as a horse coach proprietor, storekeeper and farmer before settling in Melbourne and organizing Victoria’s first motor coach tour in 1905. The business thrived and, formalized in 1913 as Withers & Son, began to secure contracts for local bus services, including a short-lived route in Warrandyte. By WW1, four of Withers’ five sons were involved in the venture: the two eldest, Arthur and Edward, as mechanics and the younger Sydney and Percy as drivers.

After WW1, the firm was rebadged as the Pioneer Motor Company, which was duly absorbed in June 1923 by a new entity, Pioneer Tourist Coaches Pty Ltd, under the control of brothers Edward, Sydney and Percy (*Herald* 22/06/1923:14). During the 1920s, the business boomed as its tourist coach trade spread interstate. In February 1929, Percy married Clare Josephine Dalley (1902-1977), daughter of Melbourne’s well-known female scrap-metal dealer, Marie ‘Ma’ Dalley, and the newlyweds settled in Kew. That year saw the birth of Percy and Clare’s only child, daughter Joan Mignonette Withers (died 2006), as well as the death of Percy’s father, Albert. By the early 1940s, Percy and Clare had separated and he was residing alone in a flat in Parkville. After their divorce was finalized in late 1948, Percy married again, to Gwendoline Marion McLean. The couple took up residence in Balwyn North, at 30 Longview Road.

The early post-WW2 era saw Percy Withers form a new company, Withers Transport Pty Ltd, to exploit the rapidly rising demand for local bus services. Initially based in South Melbourne, the firm duly expanded with a bus depot in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, and then another on Doncaster Road, Doncaster East, to serve Box Hill and Warrandyte. To oversee the latter, Percy moved his family (by then, expanded by son David and daughters Jillian and Margaret) from Balwyn to Doncaster East in the early 1950s, taking up residence in a modest cream brick dwelling at 175 Blackburn Road. It was towards the end of that decade that Withers, with an eye on upgrading the facilities of his bus depot, became acquainted with designer Alistair Knox.

2.2.2 The Designer: Alistair Knox

Alistair Knox (1912-1986) started his career as a bank clerk and, returning from WW2, enrolled in the architecture course at Melbourne Technical College (now RMIT) only to drop out after two years. From 1948, he began experimenting with mud-brick as a solution to the post-WW2 housing shortage, and was responsible for the design and erection of several high-profile houses for brave clients, mostly artists and academics in the Eltham area, characterised not only by their bold articulation of natural building materials but also by their innovative planning, passive solar design and sensitive integration of the landscaped context.

From 1955, Knox turned his attention to the development of a modular construction system based on more conventional forms, details and materials, designing brick and timber houses on compact rectilinear plans with flat or low-pitched roofs. In 1958, while still embracing this mode, Knox was engaged by Withers to prepare plans for expansion of the bus depot on Doncaster Road, in a rare foray beyond the residential work that largely defined Knox’s output at the time. The designer’s involvement with the depot site commenced with plans for a four-lot subdivision and a small shop with rear residential flat (June 1958), followed by evolving schemes for a gable-roofed bus garage and repair workshop with attached offices (January to April 1959), and two subsequent phases of addition (July and September 1959). Historic aerial photographs confirm that these works were realised in accordance with Knox’s proposal.

After the Credit Squeeze of the early 1960s, Knox reverted to his earlier approach and developed an idiosyncratic environmental style that was based on the use of mud brick, stone, rough timber and second-hand brick. From the mid-1960s, his residential work was invariably characterised by this trademark use of natural materials as well as open planning, irregular skillion rooflines with clerestory windows, and a careful consideration of landscaped context (often, in collaboration with garden designers such as Ellis Stones, Gordon Ford and Peter Glass). Knox's reputation rose sharply during the self-building movement of the 1970s, and he remained keenly sought-after until his death in 1986. Simultaneously active in local affairs (serving as an Eltham Shire councillor), he wrote several books and many articles, and also lectured. Two years before his death, Knox received an honorary Doctorate of Architecture for his unique contribution to design.

2.2.3 The House

Percy Withers' desire for a new house in Balwyn North can be traced back to early July 1961, when the Box Hill and Warrandyte bus routes operated by Withers Transport Industries were acquired by the Melbourne & Metropolitan Tramways Board 'for an undisclosed sum' (*Age*, 14/04/1961:5). The takeover included the bus depot on Doncaster Road, which was retained by the MMTB for a few years before it was superseded around 1965 by new and larger counterpart on the other side of the street (now 868-870 Doncaster Road). The former depot site, with its Knox buildings, was duly sold and redeveloped with a row of commercial premises (now 861 Doncaster Road).

While Withers retained his interest in Pioneer Tourist Services, the sale of his suburban bus lines ushered in an era of semi-retirement that prompted the family's relocation back to Balwyn North. On 26 July 1961, barely three weeks after the MMTB takeover, Percy and Gwen acquired the title to a block of land on the south side of Corby Street (Certificate of Title, 6891/051). This formed Lot 101 of the *Rockwood Estate*, a subdivision of 66 allotments created in 1927 from a vast property held for more than four decades by farmer William Patterson Vettler, who had died the previous year (*Weekly Times*, 27 November 1926:88). While the *Rookwood Estate* underwent limited development prior to WW2, residential settlement boomed in the 1950s. By the time that Percy and Gwen Withers purchased Lot 101 in 1961, it was one of the last vacant sites remaining in Corby Street.

Following Knox's involvement with Withers' bus depot, spanning at least fifteen months, it is no surprise that his services were retained for the new house at Balwyn North. To accommodate their family of three children, Percy and Gwen required a four bedroom house with generous living space. Knox proposed a single-storey flat-roofed brick building on a stepped rectilinear plan with separate areas for 'formal living' and 'general living' (the latter, unusually for the time, integrated with an open-planned kitchen). The master bedroom (to the front) and three smaller bedrooms (to the rear) were separated by a service core with two bathrooms flanking a laundry. In Knox's initial proposal, the street frontage incorporated a small entry porch to the west (left) corner and a flat-roofed carport to the right (east). This was subsequently revised, with a second set of drawings showing substantial reconfiguration of the northern part of the house: the formal living room was rotated by ninety degrees, the entry porch relocated, a wide balcony added, and the attached carport replaced with a capacious sub-floor parking area with space for three cars.

A building permit for the new house, to be erected in accordance with the second scheme, was issued by the City of Camberwell in August 1962. On the permit card, the builder was listed as Alistair Knox Pty Ltd of York Street, Eltham, and the project referred to as '6RBV' (ie, six-roomed brick veneer) worth £7,500. Although not specifically noted on the drawings, the house was to be erected of so-called modular concrete bricks, which had then only recently been introduced into Victoria after several years of successful use interstate (*Age*, 06/07/1959:8). Marketed by the Besser company under the trade name of Beslite, these concrete bricks were manufactured in the firm's factory in Dandenong and were available in ninety different sizes (all based on a standard four-inch module) and a range of colours that included 'terra cotta, desert buff, dawn pink, golden sand, sage green charcoal and natural grey' (*Age*, 01/07/1960:13).

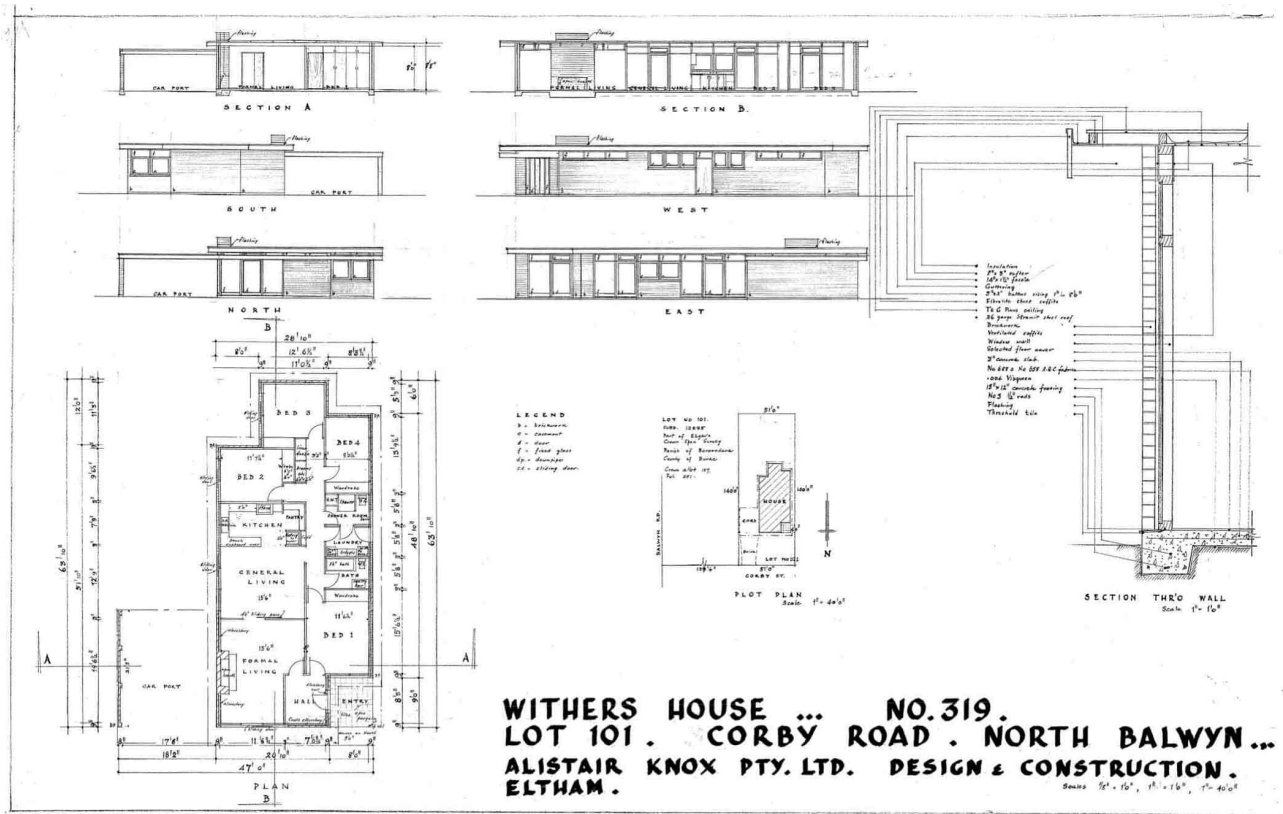


Figure 1: Undated working drawings for initial scheme with attached carport to east side
source: www.alistairknox.org

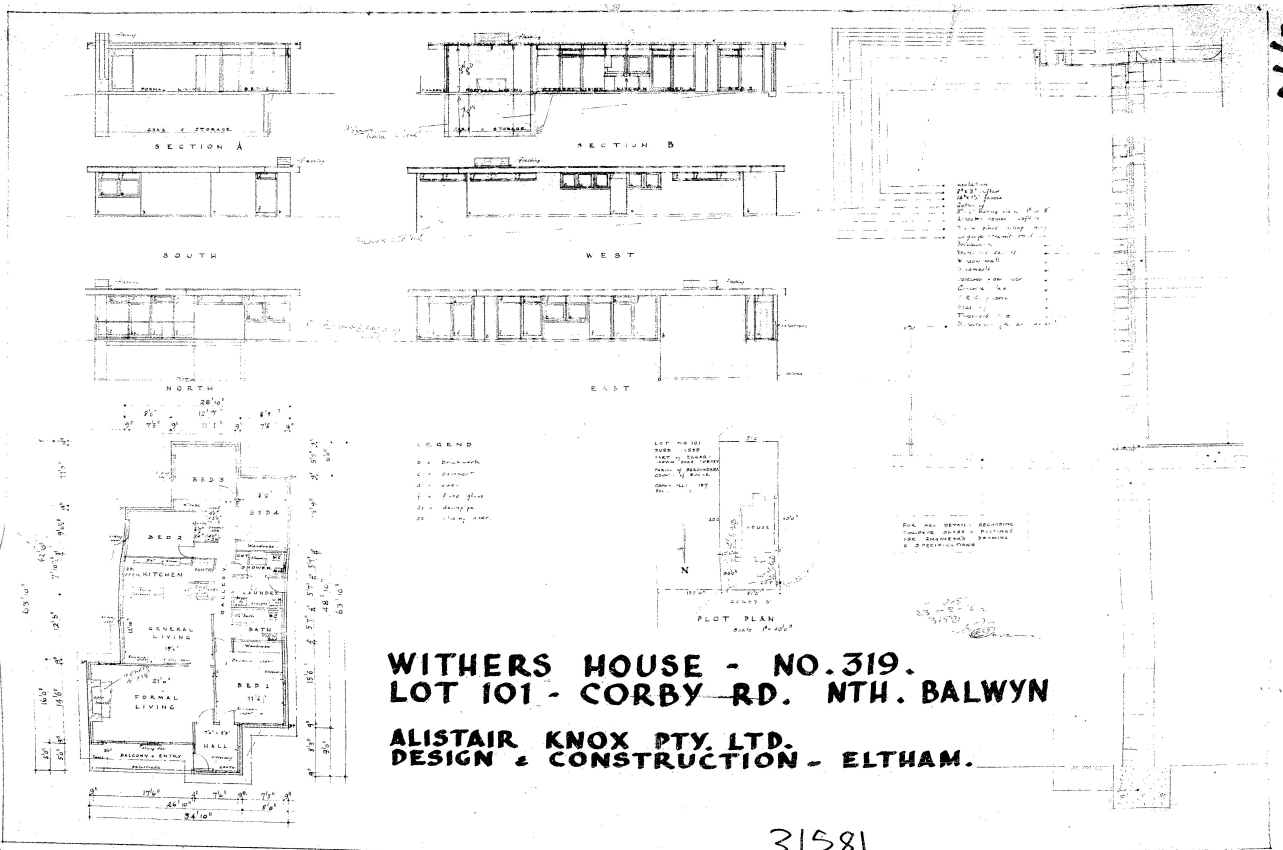


Figure 2: Undated working drawings for revised scheme with sub-floor garage
source: City of Camberwell Building Permit No 31,581, copy held by City of Boroondara

Percy and Gwen's son David moved to Sydney around the time that the house was completed, but the family continued to live there for the rest of the decade. According to the building permit card, Knox was retained for two follow-up projects: a 'workshop' (February 1963; £210) and 'fowl shed' (October 1964; £240). Drawings for these minor works have evidently not survived in the Knox archive. Amongst the documentation that has survived therein is a 'path and garden layout' plan (Figure 3) that, while undated, evidently post-dates completion of the house, as it references both proposed and existing paths. The plan shows a bottleneck driveway with 'toppings' (ie crushed rock), stone retaining walls and various plantings that include two prunus trees, a liquidambar, and 'selected Australian native shrubs' to the front garden. An aerial photograph of the property from the late 1960s (Figure 4) suggests that this garden scheme was at least partially realised.

The designer of the landscaping scheme is unknown, as the plan lacks a title block. Suggestion that it may have been the work of Peter Glass (1917-1997), a one-time Knox employee and later a noted landscape designer in his own right, is disproven by reference to Glass's archive, now held by the State Library of Victoria, which contains no documentation pertaining to this project.¹

In May 1970, the house was offered for sale by auction as 'an elevated contemporary brick veneer home' with 'superb views from front terrace across Yarra Valley' (Age 02/05/1970:27). Another advertisement underscored the fact that the house was 'designed and built by ALISTAIR KNOX' [emphasis original], drawing attention to its well-appointed interior with 'exposed beams and parquet floors' and its atypically grand family-oriented layout, with four bedrooms, three-car garage and 'family room' – the latter still a relatively new term at the time (Age, 14/11/1970:36). In 1971, the house was acquired by barrister Paul Willee and his wife Barbara, who lived there until 2006, and there have been two owners since then. Council records confirm that no major changes or additions have been made to the property since Knox's follow-up works in 1963-64.

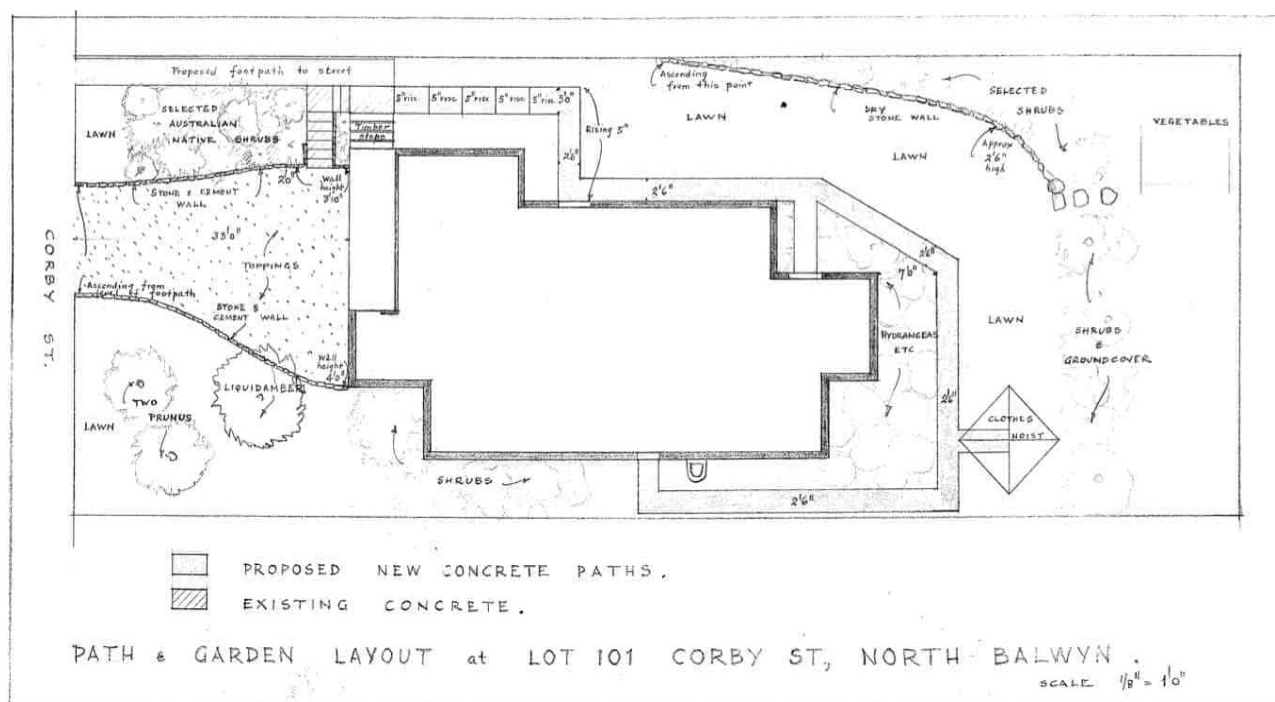


Figure 3: Undated and unattributed plan showing development of hard and soft landscaping
source: www.alistairknox.org

1 Peter Glass, Collection of Landscape Designs, LTAD131, State Library of Victoria. The collection, spanning three decades from 1960, includes drawing for four other residential landscaping projects in the Balwyn area: the Cooke House, Barnsbury Road (1970), the Barden House, 48 Yerrin Street (1978), the Gibson House, 12 Duggan Street (undated) and the Wail House, 41 Inverness Way (undated). Glass also undertook at least 17 commissions elsewhere in the municipality, at Burwood, Camberwell, Canterbury, Glen Iris, Hawthorn, Kew and Kew East.



*Figure 4: Detail of aerial photograph from January 1969, showing extent of landscape development
 source: Frame 216, Run 5, Eastern Freeway Project, Central Plan Office*

2.3 DESCRIPTION

2.3.1 House

The former Withers House (Figure 5) is a single-storey flat-roofed modernist house of concrete brick veneer construction. Occupying a site that slopes upwards from the street, the house is partially elevated to incorporate a generous three-bay parking area below. External walls are of beige-coloured modular concrete brickwork, laid in stretcher bond, and the flat roof is clad in metal tray decking, and has broad unlined eaves with exposed rafters, matching timber fascias and concealed guttering. The street facade is triple-fronted and asymmetrical. The left side is dominated by the wide recessed bay of the formal living room, which has sliding glass doors, large fixed windows and narrow highlights, opening onto a concrete slab balcony with simple metal balustrade. To the right of the balcony is a projecting off-centre bay, containing the entry porch, with a long horizontal window below the eaves lines. Further to the right, and recessed further back, is the exposed front wall of the master bedroom, which has a large picture window.

At the far left end of the balcony is a metal framed staircase with matching balustrade, which connects to a right-angled flight of concrete steps leading down to the driveway level, alongside stepping planter boxes. The carport area, which extends almost the full width of the house, is framed by brick walls, with a row of black-painted metal poles below the front door. The carport includes a doorway to the rear and a workshop area off the west side, enclosed by a timber infill wall. A garden wall, in matching concrete brick, extends further west, forming a raised bed.

2.3.2 Garden

The front garden comprises two irregular lawn areas flanking a bottleneck driveway with textured concrete finish (inset with slate panels) and slate-clad kerbing. To the left (east) side, the lawn contains a mature deciduous tree, behind which is a low retaining wall of coursed river stone, running north-south from the concrete steps to the letterbox on the street (Figure 6). The letterbox itself is a freestanding pier-like structure, erected of matching modular concrete brickwork.

The current garden layout does not wholly correspond with either the undated landscape plan (Figure 3) or the aerial photograph from 1969 (Figure 4). The driveway is slightly different in form and its paving and kerbs are not original, having replaced the crushed stone toppings shown on the plan and seemingly evident on the aerial photograph. The stone wall is set slightly further east than shown on the drawing, while the proposed concrete path from the house to the street is not evident. The trees planted to the west of the driveway have been removed.



Figure 5: General view of the street frontage
Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021



Figure 6: Oblique view, showing landscaping
Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2021

The status of the landscaping in the backyard has not been confirmed, as it cannot be seen from the street or recent aerial photographs. The 1969 photograph shows a slightly different configuration of concrete paths than indicated on the plan. Photographs of the rear of the house, taken at the time of its last sale in 2020, confirm the existence of a curving stone retaining wall that appears to correspond to the c1963 plan, as well as areas of crazy paving that are not shown on the plan.

Based on this evidence, it would appear that the original landscaping scheme was only partially implemented, and has since been reconfigured. The concrete entry steps, stone retaining wall and brick letterbox appear to constitute the surviving fabric from the 1960s hard landscaping.

2.4 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

2.4.1 Post-WW2 Houses in Balwyn & Balwyn North

Examples already on HO Schedule

The following is a list of the relatively few post-WW2 houses in Balwyn and Balwyn North that are currently included on the City of Boroondara HO schedule (as of June 2021)

- Cameron House, 6 Bulleen Road, Balwyn North (C S Cameron, 1951) [HO170]
- Sanders House, 3 Kalonga Road, Balwyn North (F J Sanders, 1948-55) [HO176]
- Gillison House, 43 Kireep Road, Balwyn (Robin Boyd, 1951) [HO177]
- Castle House (*Stargazer*), 1/2 Taurus Street, Balwyn North (Peter McIntyre, 1953) [HO189]
- Bunbury House, 300 Balwyn Road, Balwyn North (Robin Boyd, 1949) [HO616]

All of these examples were built in the early post-WW2 period, with the most recent one dating from 1955 (representing a belated date of completion for the Sanders House in Kalonga Road). Both chronologically and aesthetically, none of these houses is directly comparable to the subject building. The examples on Bulleen Road and Kalonga Road (both designed by owners who were not qualified architects) are in a *retardataire* mode, far more evocative of pre-WW2 Streamlined Moderne style than post-WW2 modernism. The houses on Kireep Road and Taurus Street, both dating from the early 1950s, are exceptional manifestations of the emerging Melbourne Regional style, and were designed by two of its leading exponents. The Bunbury House, a hitherto unknown Boyd project that was only rediscovered in 2014, is a seminal example of the architect's maturing approach to residential work, dating from his brief period in solo practice before entering into his celebrated partnership with Roy Grounds and Frederick Romberg in 1953.



Figure 7: Lipton House, Hill Road (1964-66)
 Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012



Figure 8: Plotkin House, Mountainview Rd (1966)
 Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012

Examples recommended for addition to HO Schedule

While the current heritage overlay schedule includes no houses in Balwyn or Balwyn North dating from the 1960s, the four examples were recommended for inclusion in the *Balwyn & Balwyn North Heritage Review*. These are as follows:

- Lipton House, 67 Hill Road, Balwyn North (Kevin O'Neill & Raymond Tung, 1964-66)
- Plotkin House, 47 Mountain View Road, Balwyn North (Conarg Architects, 1966)
- Mitchell House, 2 Salford Avenue, Balwyn (Tad Karasinski, 1962-63)
- Raftopolous House, 69 Sylvander Street, Balwyn North (designer unknown, 1962)

The second two comparators have very little commonality with the subject building. The Mitchell House, designed by a European-trained architect for a German-born client, is an idiosyncratic hybrid design that merges a flat-roofed dwelling in the orthodox European Modernist style with a quirkier A-framed wing, intended to evoke the owner's fondness for traditional alpine dwellings. The Raftopolous House, which does not appear to have been architect-designed, was not deemed to be important as an outstanding specimen of modernist design in its own right but, rather as a rare intact surviving example of the so-called 'Immigrant Nostalgic' style associated with the post-WW2 influx of southern European migrants.

The Lipton House (Figure 7) and the Plotkin House (Figure 8) both have broad characteristics in common with the subject building, namely the use of broad-eaved flat roofs, plain brick walls, horizontal strip windows and stepped volumetric massing influenced by the sloping sites. The Plotkin House is even more directly comparable because, like the Withers House, it was erected of modular concrete bricks (unusual at that time) rather than conventional clay bricks. Notably, the Withers House predates both of these comparators by several years. Aesthetically, all three houses are manifestations of a specific sub-style of post-WW2 modernism that has been described by Dr Philip Goad as 'mature modern' (see discussion under 2.4.2).²

Examples flagged for potential significance

In addition to the places for which individual citations were prepared, the *Balwyn & Balwyn North Heritage Study* also provided a list of an additional forty places that were recommended for further assessment. At that time, individual citations were not prepared for these properties merely due to budget limitations, which had necessarily restricted the number of citations to be prepared. Of these forty places, eight were houses dating from the 1960s:

² Philip Goad, 'The Modern House in Melbourne', Ph D Thesis, University of Melbourne, September 1992, p 6.56.

- Heenan House, 41 Campbell Road, Balwyn (Neil Clerehan & Guilford Bell, 1962)
- Montalto House, 101 Cityview Road, Balwyn North (Dr Ernest Fooks, c1962)
- Karakostas House, 9 Earls Court, Balwyn North (Robert H Denny, 1969)
- Inge House, 30 Ferdinand Avenue, Balwyn North (Drayton & Coleman, 1964)
- McBride House, 72 Greythorn Road, Balwyn North (David Godsell, 1961)
- Henning House, 9 Penn Street, Balwyn North (Norman Brendel, 1962)
- Schuster House, 27 Tuxen Street, Balwyn North (Holgar & Holgar, 1964)
- Dr Leong House and clinic, 46 Walnut Road, Balwyn North (John F Tipping, 1965)

All of these houses have characteristics in common with the Withers House, notably the use of face brickwork, broad-eaved flats roofs and strategically-placed windows of varying form. Occupying sloping sites typical for the Balwyn area, most of the houses are expressed as stepped volumes with garages or carports underneath, as with the Withers House. Despite these commonalities, the houses exhibit a range of aesthetic sub-styles associated with post-WW2 Melbourne architecture: the ones by Ernest Fooks and Holgar & Holgar, for example, are typical of the academic modernist style associated with European-trained migrant architects, while the McBride House in Greythorn Road is evocative of the Prairie School mode that imbues much of Godsell's work.

Of the eight examples listed above, those more directly comparable to the Withers House are the three precisely contemporaneous houses at 101 Cityview Road (Figure 9), 9 Penn Street (Figure 10) and, particularly 41 Campbell Road (Figure 11). The last is by far the most pertinent comparator, being similarly articulated with stark face brick walls in projecting and recessing planes, and similarly evocative of the sub-style referred to by Philip Goad as 'mature modern'.

2.4.2 Houses in the 'Mature Modern' mode

Within the City of Boroondara

In his post-graduate thesis on modern residential architecture in Melbourne, Dr Philip Goad coined the term 'mature modern' to describe an aesthetic sub-style that emerged in the early 1960s. In contrast to the so-called Melbourne Regional style of the 1950s, defined by bold experimentation of geometric forms, structural expression and lively colour schemes, the 'mature modern' was a more sedate and monumental style, characterised by 'efficient structural means, a reduced palette of materials, generous amounts of glass and elegantly simple details'. Houses in the 'mature modern' mode were typically expressed with carefully considered rectilinear planning, broad-eaved flat roofs and stark planar walls in face brick or concrete block.



Figure 9: Montalto House, Cityview Road (c1962)
Photography Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012



Figure 10: Henning House, Penn Street (1962)
Photography by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012



Figure 11: Heenan House, Campbell Road (1962)
 Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012



Figure 12: Dr W Adam House, Millah Road (1967)
 Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012

In his thesis, Goad identified several leading Melbourne architects as the key practitioners of the 'mature modern' idiom, namely Neil Clerehan, Guilford Bell, Bernard Joyce, David McGlashan and John Adam. In his discussion of specific manifestations, Goad drew attention to two houses that are located in what is now the City of Boroondara: the Guss House at 18 Yarra Street, Kew (McGlashan & Everist, 1963) and an architect's own home at 16b Waterloo Road, Camberwell (A R van Rompaey, 1966). Occupying a sloping site, the former is a split-level house articulated as two floating glass-walled volumes, while the latter is a flat-roofed dwelling with plain brick walls and full-height windows that define a sprawling C-shaped courtyard plan. While of aesthetic interest in their own right, neither of these two houses is directly comparable with the Withers House.

Research has identified several other examples of the 'mature modern' in the City of Boroondara, including four houses in Balwyn by John Adam. Of these, the two earliest, at 7 Lydia Court (1960) at 51 Dempster Avenue (1962), have both been demolished. A later house still standing at 7a Millah Road (1967; Figure 12), commissioned by the architect's father Dr William Adam, expressed the 'mature modern' style in the quirkier medium of roughly textured brickwork with a white-painted finish. Adam's Pleasance House at 2 Shrimpton Court (c1971), with its stark expression of planar beige brick walls, is more reminiscent of the Withers House, albeit a decade later in date.

The Balwyn houses previously mentioned in section 2.4.1, comprising the Lipton House in Hill Road, the Plotkin House in Mountainview Road and the Heenan House in Campbell Road, stand out as the best local examples of the 'mature modern' style, and thus constitute the most pertinent comparators to the Withers House. However, it is not a question of which one is superior to any of the others. All four houses are considered to be of aesthetic significance in their own right, and worthy candidates for individual heritage overlays.

2.4.3 Houses by Alistair Knox

Within the City of Boroondara

As mentioned in section 2.1, the assertion that Alistair Knox designed only three houses in the City of Boroondara is incorrect. Rather, he is confirmed to have received at least nineteen commissions, comprising eleven new dwellings and eight residential renovations. The individual houses are as follows (client names and dates are as recorded in the website, www.alistairknox.org):

- Withers House, 32 Corby Street, Balwyn (1962)
- Yorston House, 1 Georgian Court, Balwyn (1966)
- Ray House, 84 Wattle Valley Road, Camberwell (1967)

- Drake House, 105 Greythorn Road, Balwyn North (1967) – *demolished c.2020*
- Raynor House, 11 Kembla Street, Hawthorn (1969)
- Cooke House, 2 Barnsbury Court, Balwyn (1970) – *demolished c.2015*
- Coulter House, 12 Barbara Avenue, Camberwell (1971)
- Elms House, 105 Yarrbat Avenue, Balwyn (1972) – *demolished c.2008*
- Grieve House, 44 Hartington Street, Kew (1975) – *demolished c.2013*
- Golias House, 6 Stirling Street, Kew (1975)
- Bell House, 21 Yarrbat Avenue, Balwyn (1978)
- Kennedy House, 4 Norbert Street, Balwyn (1983)³

Thus tabulated, a number of pertinent observations can be made from this data. Of eleven houses that Knox is (so far) known to have designed in what is now the City of Boroondara, more than half were in the Balwyn and Balwyn North area. Dating from 1962, the subject building not only represents the designer's earliest known residential commission in Balwyn, but also in the broader City of Boroondara. As such, it occupies a significant place in the chronology of Knox's work across the entire municipality. In parallel, it represents a sharp contrast to Knox's later houses in the City of Boroondara, in that it was conceived in the more mainstream modernist style, with modular planning, planar brick walls and low rooflines with broad eaves, which characterised his output from c.1955 until c.1964. Subsequently, Knox resumed designing in the environmental approach for which he is best known, adopting more idiosyncratic planning, irregular rooflines, and more overtly organic materials such as mud brick, stone and rough timber.

All of Knox's subsequent houses in the City of Boroondara were conceived in this environmental mode, albeit with some variation in the extent to which the aesthetic was embraced. One example from 1966, the Ray House in Camberwell (Figure 13), is an otherwise conventional two-storey hip-roofed house on a rectilinear plan, with Knox's earthy approach demonstrated only by the use of rough brickwork and diagonal timber-lined ceilings. Three other single-storey examples from the 1960s (the Yorston House, Drake House and Raynor House) were consistently expressed in clinker brick with low gabled roofs, broad eaves and full-height window bays. The Raynor House has since been altered by a large two-storey gable-roofed front addition, in white painted brick, which effectively conceals the original single-storey brick house from the street (Figure 14).

It was not until the early 1970s that Knox's local output began to more boldly reflect his organic approach: this commenced with the two-storey Cooke House in Balwyn (1970), which adopted the designer's trademark expression of exposed trabeation in rough timber with mud brick infill and stone paving. The Coulter House in Glen Iris (1971; Figure 15), Elms House in Balwyn (1972) and Grieve House in Kew (1975) were houses of similar expression and comparable scale, albeit in clinker brick rather than mud brick, while the more modest single-storey Golias House in Kew (1975; Figure 16), also in clinker brick, had a tighter plan and flat roof with pop-up clerestory and broad timber fascias. For the later Bell House (1978) and Kennedy House (1983), both in Balwyn, Knox returned to his trademark style, with mud brick and exposed timber structure (Figure 17).

Clearly, none of the other houses that Knox designed in the City of Boroondara are directly comparable to the subject building. While the other houses are all demonstrative, to a greater or lesser degree, of Knox's characteristic environmental style, the Withers House stands out as a rare local example of his work in the modern mainstream modernist style that defined his work in the later 1950s and early 1960s. The fact that it is not demonstrative of his trademark 'Eltham style', however, does not mean that the house cannot be considered significant in its own right.

³ Curiously, this late Knox project is not documented on the website www.alistairknox.org. Rather, it was identified by Built Heritage Pty Ltd during fieldwork for the 2012 heritage study, and its attribution confirmed by drawings sourced from the City of Boroondara's building permit archive.



Figure 13: Ray House, 84 Wattle Valley Road (1966)
Source: www.realestate.com.au
(photograph by Jellis Craig)



Figure 14: Raynor House, 11 Kembla Street (1969)
Source: www.alistairknox.org
(photograph by Tony Knox)



Figure 15: Coulter House, 12 Barbara Avenue (1971)
Source: www.realestate.com.au



Figure 16: Goliath House, 6 Stirling Street (1975)
Source: www.realestate.com.au



Figure 17: Kennedy House, 4 Norbert Street (1983)
Photograph by Built Heritage Pty Ltd, 2012



Figure 18: Burnside House addition (1962)
Source: www.realestate.com.au



Figure 19: Trivett House, Syndal (1962)

Source: www.realestate.com.au

(Photograph by Jellis Craig)



Figure 20: Chandler House, Doncaster (1963)

Source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

(Photograph by Peter Wille)

Ultimately, the subject building can only be pertinently compared to one other example of Knox's work in the City of Boroondara: a two-storey addition to the rear of an existing single-storey house at 4a Rubens Grove, Canterbury (1962; Figure 18). Designed for the Burnside family, this addition is precisely contemporaneous with the subject building and is similarly expressed with flat roof, planar brick walls and full-height windows. However, as it is merely an addition to an existing house (and, in any case, is not even visible from the street), it can hardly be considered in the same league that the subject building as a candidate for an individual heritage overlay.

Outside the City of Boroondara

While it is not necessary to consider Knox's work outside the City of Boroondara to establish a case for significance at a local level, it might be noted that a cursory overview of his contemporaneous houses suggests that the Withers House was one of the designer's more distinguished residential projects of that period. The bulk of Knox's houses from the early 1960s were far more modestly expressed as single-storey dwellings on relatively flat sites, with simpler rectangular plans, low gabled roofs, verandahs, and conventional fenestration. This is evident in such examples as the Armitage House in Doncaster (1960), the Brown House in Watsonia (1960), the Eastman-Nagle House in Eltham (1960), the Munro House in Lower Plenty (1960), the Pitt House in Lorne (1960), the Smith House in Carrum (1960), the Hensle House in Eltham (1961), the Mitchell House in Eltham (1961), and the double-storeyed Crook House in Ivanhoe (1962).

A more refined expression, with broad-eaved flat roofs and windows as horizontal strips and full-height bays, appears to have emerged with the Pain House in Eltham (1960) and then recurred in the Harvey House in Geelong (1962), the Trivett House in Syndal (1962; Figure 19), the Bell House in Doncaster (1962), the Bellamy House in Frankston (1963), the Bryant House in Highton (1963), the Neish House in Doncaster (1963), the Nixon House in Kangaroo Ground (1963) and the Van Raalte House in Eltham North (1963). All of these, however, were single-storey dwellings on relatively flat sites, with relatively compact plans. The more expansive and elevated Withers House, built into a slope with a vast sub-floor garage, represents a far more sophisticated architectural composition. In the context of Knox's houses of the early 1960s, its nearest counterpart would be the split-level Chandler House at Doncaster (1963; Figure 20), although that house was built into a site that slopes down from the street, rather than up from the street.

2.5 ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

2.5.1 Assessment against Criteria

Criteria referred to in *Practice Note 1: Applying the Heritage Overlay*, Department of Planning and Community Development, September 2012, modified for the local context.

CRITERION A: *Importance to the course, or pattern, of the City of Boroondara's cultural or natural history (historical significance).*

Not applicable

CRITERION B: *Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of the City of Boroondara's cultural or natural history (rarity).*

Not applicable

CRITERION C: *Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the City of Boroondara's cultural or natural history (research potential).*

Not applicable

CRITERION D: *Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural or natural places or environments (representativeness).*

Not applicable

CRITERION E: *Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics (aesthetic significance).*

The Withers House is an excellent and virtually unaltered example of a house in the so-called 'mature modern' style that emerged in Melbourne in the early 1960s, characterised by simple but elegant articulation of planar masonry walls, broad-eaved flat roofs and full-height and/or horizontal strip windows. With its stark walls of beige-coloured modular concrete brickwork, exposed timber beams and asymmetrical facade hovering above a capacious sub-floor triple carport, it is a particularly sophisticated expression of this idiom.

CRITERION F: *Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period (technical significance).*

Not applicable

CRITERION G: *Strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons. This includes the significance of a place to Indigenous peoples as part of continuing and developing cultural traditions (social significance).*

Not applicable

CRITERION H: *Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in the City of Boroondara's history (associative significance).*

The Withers House has special associations with celebrated designer Alistair Knox, representing the first of many residential commissions that he undertook in what is now the City of Boroondara, and the only one associated with a phase in his career (from c.1955 to c.1964) in which he embraced conventional building materials and a mainstream modernist idiom to produce modular dwellings of simple but elegant design.

2.5.2 Statement of Significance

What is significant?

The former Withers House at 32 Corby Street, Balwyn North, is an elevated single-storey modernist house of beige-coloured modular concrete brick, with a flat roof, broad eaves with exposed beams and an asymmetrical triple-fronted street façade that incorporates a concrete slab balcony with full-height windows and metal balustrade, and a large sub-floor parking area with space for three vehicles. Commissioned in 1962 by transport company proprietor Percy Withers and his wife Gwen, the house was designed and built by Alistair Knox Pty Ltd (who was retained to undertake two minor phases of follow-up work in 1963-64).

The significant fabric is defined at the exterior of the entire house, including the matching concrete brick retaining walls and planter boxes, metal balcony stairs, the concrete steps to the driveway, the low stone retaining wall running north-south to the street, and the matching brick letterbox.

How is it significant?

The former Withers House is of aesthetic and associative significance to the City of Boroondara.

Why is it significant?

Aesthetically, the house is significant as an excellent example of a house in the so-called 'mature modern' style that emerged in Melbourne in the early 1960s, characterised by simple but elegant articulation of planar masonry walls, broad-eaved flat roofs and full-height and/or horizontal strip windows. With its stark walls of beige-coloured modular concrete brickwork (at the time, a fairly new material), exposed timber beams and asymmetrical facade hovering over an atypically large sub-floor triple garage, it is a particularly sophisticated expression of this idiom. Virtually unaltered since the designer undertook further works in 1963-64, this uncommonly intact house remains potently evocative of its era, enhanced by the retention of some contemporaneous hard landscaping elements such as steps, retaining walls, and a matching letterbox (*Criterion E*)

The house is significant for associations with the eminent and prolific designer Alistair Knox, for whom it represented his first individual residential commission in what is now the City of Boroondara. While Knox went on to design more than a dozen other houses in the municipality over the next two decades (most of which were also located in Balwyn and Balwyn North), the former Withers House stands out as the only one associated with the middle phase of his career, from c.1955 to c.1964, when he embraced conventional building materials and a mainstream modernist idiom to produce modular dwellings of simple but elegant design. (*Criterion H*)

2.5.3 Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay of the Boroondara Planning Scheme as an individually significant place.

Recommendations for the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay (Clause 43.01):

External Paint Controls	No
Internal Alteration Controls	No
Tree Controls	No
Victorian Heritage Register	No
Incorporated plan	No
Exemptions for outbuildings and fences	No
Prohibited uses may be permitted	No
Aboriginal Heritage Place	No

2.6 SOURCES

2.6.1 References

Primary Sources

'Mr A A Withers dies: tourist coach pioneer', *Herald*, 17 July 1929, p 1.⁴

Certificate of Title, Volume 6891, Folio 051, created 15 April 1946.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers Subdivision Proposal No 228/1',
working drawings, 14 June 1958, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers No 228/2: Resite shop and dwelling',
working drawings, 1 July 1958, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers Transport Industry Pty Ltd Bus Repair Depot & Offices No 227/2',
working drawings, 26 January 1959, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers Transport Industry Pty Ltd, Bus Depot, No 227/3',
working drawings, 14 February 1959, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers Transport Industry Pty Ltd, 227/4',
working drawings, 1 April 1959, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers Transport Industry Office Block No 227',
working drawings, 1 July 1959, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers Extension No 254',
working drawings, 2 September 1959, www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers House No 319, Lot 101 Corby Road, North Balwyn',
working drawings, undated [initial scheme], www.alistairknox.org.

Alistair Knox Pty Ltd, 'Withers House No 319, Lot 101 Corby Road, North Balwyn',
working drawings, undated [revised scheme], copy held by City of Boroondara
(City of Camberwell Building Permit No 31,581, issued 23 August 1962).

'Path and garden layout at Lot 101 Corby Street, North Balwyn', landscaping plan, undated.
www.alistairknox.org.

City of Camberwell Building Permit Card for 32 Corby Street, Balwyn North, held by City of
Boroondara.

David Withers, emails to Simon Reeves, 17 June and 1 July 2021.⁵

Secondary Sources

Fay Woodhouse, 'Knox, Alistair Samuel (1912-1986)', in Diane Langmore (ed), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 17 1981-90 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007).

Richard Peterson & Bohdan Kusyk 2014, 'Alistair Knox (1912-1986): Modernism, Environment and the Spirit of Place', *RMIT Design Archives Journal*, Volume 4, Number 3 (2014), pp 5-23.

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, *Balwyn & Balwyn North Heritage Review* (2015).

2.6.2 Identified by

Built Heritage Pty Ltd, *Balwyn & Balwyn North Heritage Review* (2015)

- designated as 'Priority 2' in master-list of places of potential significance, p 223.

4 Another obituary for Alfred Withers, which appeared in the *Age*, 18 August 1929, p 9, was found to contain a great deal of inaccurate information, stating that he only had three sons, and that their firm was established in 1907.

5 David Withers, now living in Sydney, is the sole survivor of Percy and Clare Withers' three children.