

people place heritage

CONTEXT

HERITAGE ASSESSMENT

Half House, 108 George Street, St
Albans

Revised report
20 September 2015

Prepared for
City of Brimbank



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Report Register

This report register documents the development and issue of the report entitled *Heritage Assessment: Half House, 108 George Street, St Albans* undertaken by Context Pty Ltd in accordance with our internal quality management system.

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1 BACKGROUND

Context Pty Ltd was commissioned in 2015 to assess the heritage significance of ‘Half Houses’ located at the following addresses:

- 94 Biggs Street, 108 George Street and 21 Leslie Street in St Albans. None of these properties are currently listed on the Heritage Overlay.

Due to the demolition of the Half Houses at 94 Biggs Street and 21 Leslie Street in 2015, prior to the finalisation of this report, it has been updated to reflect the current situation in 2017, and assess only the surviving Half House at 108 George Street.

The heritage citation for the Half House is found on the following pages.

2 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Key findings

The following place has been found to be of local heritage significance:

- 108 George Street, St Albans;

2.2 Recommendations

There are a number of ways to formally recognise the importance of the half house phenomenon in the post-war development of the St Albans area, as represented by the sole known surviving example. The best outcome would be a combination of more than one of the options set out below:

- Add the place to HO Schedule of the Brimbank Planning Scheme as an individual place.
- Physically preserve the Half House. The St Albans History Society has indicated that they would like to take ownership of a half house prior to its site being developed, moving it to a new site. It is not known if a target site or funds for this move have been secured by the History Society.
- Document the Half House, for example, in the form of measured drawings, archival photography, and/or oral histories of people who built and/or lived in this or other half houses.
- Implement an interpretation program to spread knowledge of this phenomenon in the Brimbank community. This could take many forms, for example, interpretive signage in front of the Half House on its original site or on the History Society’s site (if moved); or an exhibition and/or publication sharing the documentation and oral histories prepared as in point 2.

PLACE CITATION: HALF HOUSE, 108 GEORGE STREET, ST ALBANS



Figure 1. Half House at 108 Biggs Street, September 2017.

History

Post-war migration

The history of post-World War Two immigration in the part of Brimbank that comprises the former Shire of Keilor sits within the broader contextual developments of immigration and settlement policy in both Victoria and Australia. Local migrant populations across the country dramatically increased during this period. This has contributed today to about 50% of Victorians having one or both parents who were born overseas (Victorian Census Data 2011).

Victoria's exposure to both European and non-European migrants before the end of World War Two shaped and characterised its response to the major influx of war refugees and later migrants from all over the world in the post-war period. In the immediate post-war years Victoria opened its doors to Displaced Persons and war refugees. Along with New South Wales, it was the leading destination for migrants during the 1950s and 1960s.

The number of British migrants arriving in Victoria was proportional to the rest of the country. However, European, and particularly southern European migrants, showed a clear and distinct preference for Melbourne and Victoria in this early peak period of migration. Many were channelled into the large manufacturing industry in Melbourne. By 1971, 47.6 percent of Greek-born migrants, 36.9 percent of Italian-born migrants, 32.5 percent of Yugoslav-born migrants and 35 percent of Polish-born migrants in Australia lived in Victoria. (Context, 2011:16-17).

Over the post war period, St Albans attracted a particularly large number of immigrants, war refugees and Displaced Persons largely because of its affordable and plentiful land. Reflecting this era of settlement, St Albans' population at the end of World War II was about 1000. By 1962, its population had grown to 7,000, to reach an astonishing 20,000 in 1966. In his novel, *The Uprooted Survive*, Vladimir Borin (1959) describes St Albans as providing an energetic and co-operative community spirit during this time (Lack, 2015).

The half house phenomenon

Half houses were made possible when the Keilor Shire Council passed bylaws in 1938 allowing 'bungalow' developments, comprising a single room or two. They were built near the back of a house lot, in the expectation that a full-scale house would be built to the front in the future. Their purpose was to aid the 'occasional family' attempting to survive the hard-hitting years following the Depression (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:84 & 91). It is not known if any half houses were built before the war.

From the late 1940s, those who journeyed to Australia on assisted passage after the World War II also often spent an initial period of time in temporary accommodation around the Melbourne region. A principal type of temporary accommodation for immigrants was the hostel. Many hostels were located in the industrial or less developed outer suburbs of Melbourne such as Altona, Broadmeadows, Brooklyn, Fishermans Bend, Holmesglen, Maribyrnong, Nunawading and Preston (Context, 2011:21).



Figure 2. A typical half-house in St Albans (St Albans Historical Society, *Around and About St Albans*, 1992, p.27).

In St Albans, Ardeer and surrounds, half houses were seen as another temporary accommodation option for newly arrived migrants. It is understood that around 1000 half houses were built in the local area during the 1950s to accommodate such an influx in migrant arrivals (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:85).

Many of these houses were constructed of fibro-cement. They often had one door and a small number of windows – they were very cold in the winter and very hot in summer. They were built by migrants who settled in St. Albans after the 2nd World War.

Keilor Shire Council allowed the construction of the half-houses on the basis that they would be extended to form a larger building of conventional house size. Many of the half houses were not converted to acceptable dwellings, but remained sub-standard constructs – garages and sleep-outs. Some, although not enlarged, were

well maintained and look quite good today surrounded by their gardens. A walk through the old streets of St. Albans and St. Albans North will show some of these rather unique houses.

Life must have been very hard for the settlers of half houses, for as recently as the 1950s and 60s hardly a road was properly made, there was no sewerage, water was still a problem, telephones a rarity, and medical and other community services almost non-existent (St Albans Historical Society, 1992:26).

Half houses were generally small one-room bungalows; often little more than sheds (St Albans Historical Society 2014:85). They offered the chance for newly arrived migrants and struggling locals to own their home, when other locations and building styles were often prohibitive. Because half houses were not permitted on the Sunshine side of Main Road, they were built in St Albans and Ardeer. However, the extent of half house construction to take place was not foreseeable at the time bylaws were passed (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:91).

Some would buy land and construct their own half house, whilst others, such as newly arrived migrant Czechoslovakian George Eisner, saw opportunity and in the 1950s bought blocks of land, built half houses, and sold them on. Eisner advertised that half houses could be built in two weeks with a deposit of as little as 220 pounds. Other migrants bought their own land and then bought a half-house from Eisner. In total the approximately 1000 half houses were lived in by around 5000 people (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:84, 92).

Almost overnight, the vacant land, thick with thistles and rocks, was sprouting timber frames and tin roofs. People slept in cars and tents while, to the background noise of constant hammering and sawing, they built a new life – a new future – just metres from other families who spoke a different language (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:85).

John Stevens remembers the half house boom of the time, how it changed St Albans and the opportunity it provided migrant families to ‘assume an Australian way of life’ (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:93-94). The Stevens family had a building supplies business and Geoff Stevens remembers how they would travel to Korweingunboora near Daylesford to pick up timber and then deliver it to the half house sites. Another St Alban’s business owner, Lou Self, remembers how the half house boom allowed his small business importing ‘continental’ foods to expand (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:94).

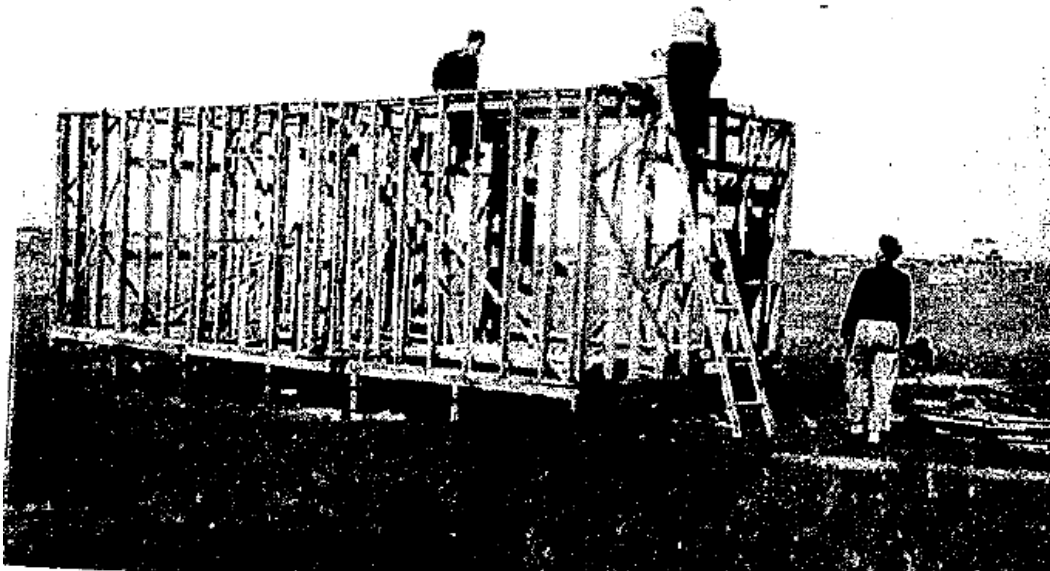


Figure 3. Constructing the timber frame of a half house in St Albans c. 1950s (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:92)

During the 1960s, half houses in the local area started to disappear as families worked to construct permanent homes, estates of brick-veneer homes were built, and community amenities were expanded (Lack, 2015). This was perhaps in some respects a relief to the Keilor Shire Council, which had begun to question the wisdom of lowering building standards in these suburbs (St Albans Historical Society, 2014:85, 91). It is said that during this time ‘...St

Albans was losing the makeshift air that accompanied shanty and bungalow dwelling...[and] gradually the isolated and dusty St Albans of old was transformed into a greener suburb with a good range of social and commercial facilities' (Lack, 2015). However, it was also acknowledged that 'The population of St Albans wouldn't be a quarter of what it is if the council hadn't helped by giving people a chance to get a roof over their heads' (*The Sunshine Advocate* cited in St Albans Historical Society, 2014:91).



St Albans backyard setting 1950s



Ribarow family: Ziva, Joseph, Aniela, Teresa, Helena 1952



First home of the Spivey family, Ruth Street 1958



Back yard scene with clothes line Fox Street St Albans



W Czernik entertaining children on a motorcycle, 1950s

Examples of St Albans' half houses c. 1950s (Brimbank Libraries, Local & Family History Gallery online)

Half House at 108 George Street

Of approximately 1000 half houses to have existed in today's City of Brimbank, primarily in the suburbs of St Albans and Ardeer, only one is known to remain in 2017. (Note that there are undoubtedly other half houses that survive as the rear lean-to to a later house, but these no longer demonstrate the half house phenomenon.) It is located at 108 George Street in St Albans. Little is known about the history of this particular half house, except what is revealed through their record of title ownership.

The land comprising 108 George Street was owned from 30 August 1945 by 'gentleman' Edgar Stanfield of 21 James Street, Northcote, as part of five acres between The Esplanade, Power, Charles and George streets. On 18 June 1956, four of the 29 house blocks were transferred to merchants Douglas Lloyd George, James Garfield and John Edwards (of Main Road West, St Albans). The block comprising 108 George Street was then sold in March 1958 to Carlo (Labourer) and Rina Todero, who at the time of purchase were listed as already living in George Street. The Todero's then sold the property in 1964 to Tony (Truck Diver) and Ana Piacentini (LV: Vol 8185 Fol 180).

Sources:

Brimbank Libraries, *Local & Family History Gallery*, retrieved from <http://www.brimbanklibraries.vic.gov.au/index.php/local-family-history-gallery>, 25 August 2015.

Context Pty Ltd, *Victoria's Post 1940s Migration Heritage*, prepared for Heritage Victoria 2011.

Lack, John, St Albans, eMelbourne, the city past and present, retrieved from <http://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01297b.htm>, 25 August 2015.

LV: Land Victoria, certificates of land title, as cited.

Melbourne's Living Museum of the West, 'Statement of Significance for the Brimbank Area', *Brimbank City Council Post-Contact Cultural Heritage Study*, 2000.

St Albans Historical Society, *Around and About St Albans*, 1992.

St Albans Historical Society, *Frontier Suburb: A Short History of St Albans*, 2014.

Description

Half houses generally comprised what was expected to become the rear lean-to of a house. They contained a kitchen and one or two other rooms. While they initially had separate dunnies, once St Albans was sewered, indoor toilets were added to some half houses. They are distinctive due to their small size and location - set towards the rear of the block and intended to be completed when money could be saved.



Figure 4. The front façade of 108 George Street (Source: Context, 2017)

The surviving Half House at 108 George Street is typical in that it is set well back on the sites, and has a low-pitched skillion roof sloping away from the front (where it was to join the future house). The walls are clad in Masonite and the four front windows are aluminium. The site retains what appear to be an original two-track concrete driveway. This Half House appears to be two rooms deep, which may result from an early extension to the rear.

Examination of a recent aerial photo (below) demonstrates how the Half House is aligned with the rear lean-tos of adjoining houses, with its front façade corresponding to the back of the other houses.



Figure 5. Aerial view of George Street, with No. 108 tagged. Note its alignment with neighbouring rear lean-tos. (Source: Google Maps, 2017)

Views to the house are somewhat obscured by a high Colorbond front fence.

The recently demolished half house at 94 Biggs Street was probably closer to its original condition than the George Street example, in that the front wall remained quite unfinished – clad in fibro-cement sheet with a single window, ready to be joined to the back of a new house.



Figure 6. 94 Biggs Street, prior to its demolition. (Source: Realestate.com.au, 2014)

Comparative analysis

An architectural comparison has not been undertaken as 108 George Street is the only known surviving half house. There was one or two more, in Ardeer, on Yallourn Street, noted in 2000 during the compiling of the City of Brimbank Post-Contact Heritage Study (Living Museum of the West). And the two other examples in St Albans, at 94 Biggs Street and 21 Leslie Street, St Albans They have all been demolished. Other freestanding surviving examples are not known. Undoubtedly there are dozens or hundreds of surviving half houses that have been incorporated into larger houses from the 1960s onward, and are now unidentifiable.

While the Half House at 108 George Street has been upgraded since it was first erected – with Masonite cladding, multiple front windows, and a rear extension – it is still a legible example of the half-house typology, and is made more significant by its rarity.

In terms of comparison under the theme of migrant heritage, the St Albans Community Hall Youth Club/ Tin Shed is of local social and historical significance due to its reflection of the growth in community services linked to the post war population boom. The building form of recycled portable Quonset hut and vernacular basalt block facade demonstrates the make-do, self-sufficient character of the club's instigators (HO192). The heritage value of this place speaks to the same era, immigration influx and community resourcefulness, as does the Half House.

Statement of significance

What is significant?

The Half House, located at 108 George Street, St Albans, is significant. It was built and occupied in the 1950s by both European immigrants and local entrepreneurs.

Keilor Shire Council passed a bylaw in 1938, near the close of the Depression, that allowed the construction of tiny ‘bungalows’ that were expected to be expanded into full-fledged houses once the economy improved. It was not until after World War II that this bylaw made its mark, with an estimated 100 half houses built in the suburbs of St Albans and Ardeer.

The half houses typically were timber-framed, with walls clad in fibro-cement sheeting or weatherboards, and a skillion roof clad in corrugated iron or asbestos cement. The Half House at 108 George Street has been re-clad in Masonite. It comprises one or two rooms plus kitchen set well back on a house block, where the rear lean-to would be, in expectation that a standard house would be built in front of them. Before St Albans was sewerred, a dunny stood behind each half house.

How is it significant?

The Half Houses is of local historical significance to the City of Brimbank.

Why is it significant?

The St Albans Half House is of historical significance to the City of Brimbank as a tangible reminder of the local area’s role in post-war migrant settlement. Brimbank, one of the most multicultural areas of Australia, saw rapid expansion of its population during the post-war period – particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. Affordable land prices provided an opportunity for many to ‘start a new life’, using their available resources. The half house phenomenon is a reflection of this moment in time. The half houses illustrate local community attitudes and actions during the post-war period. This includes the Keilor Shire Council’s 1938 bylaw that allowed for this inclusive community settlement, as well as the general community’s resourcefulness and adaptability in times of shortage and change. Community and local government cooperation resulted in a range of initiatives in the local area, reflecting the needs of the time, including the half houses, churches, schools, community centres and sports facilities. (Criterion A)