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St Leonards Apartments St Leonards Avenue, St Kilda

In St Leonards Avenue, prodigious and creative architect Nonda Katsalidis has contributed a recent chapter to the century-long story of apartment design in St Kilda. Yet these apartments develop their form from the characteristic Melbourne terrace, several of whose earliest examples, such as Elwood House (40) survive in St Kilda.



St Leonards Apartments, 2002

Craig McGregor observed that Katsalidis is in diametrical opposition to the iconoclastic Melbourne architect Peter Corrigan, who celebrates suburban life as the heart of Australian experience and the source of its most potent images. Katsalidis sees suburbia as 'neither city nor country. It's terrible, vacuous, isolated, (within an) awful lack of information and interaction; suburbia is based on real estate and the construction industry' he says 'with some ferocity'. 'I hate the suburbs, it's a disease. Nothing ever happens there'.

Clearly Katsalidis is not speaking of St Kilda - now very much inner-city. However, he is concerned to develop traditional urban forms as an expression of our own times and ways of living at greater population density, diversity of uses and with a European sense of urbanity. As John Armstrong has sagely explained: 'We need the art (architecture) of the past because it answers to needs we have in the present, but which modern culture is not very good at satisfying - or even recognising...the opportunity, of addressing the needs we have in the present, but which the present alone cannot minister to.'

Other than Katsalidis, I can name only Allan Powell (13) (16) and Peter Elliot (who has done no work in St Kilda) amongst Melbourne architects who respond to and develop the historic tradition, yet in quite a different, more purely Modernist way. Katsalidis combines the discipline of modernism with the referential richness, even extravagance of Post-modernism, in his work. And I sense with Katsalidis, a desire to articulate a strong, even iconic expression of place, and at St Leonards Avenue, an inimitably St Kilda character.

Around 1991-92, Nonda Katsalidis designed two remarkable single family houses. One became famous as a most sophisticated reinterpretation of the weekend beach shack: the house at St Andrews Beach, near Rye, for his own family. This is a most refined Modernist interpretation of the Australian vernacular tradition in natural materials, a windswept flotsam on the beach-front. In very gritty Little La Trobe Street, cheekily almost opposite Peter Corrigan's own office, Katsalidis designed the Thomas house, a single-family house in a narrow city street, amidst motorbike showrooms and small commercial businesses.

In 1994, Katsalidis designed and developed Melbourne Terrace, the first major new housing project in the city for over 20 years. It combines 65 high density apartments, car-park, retail, offices and penthouses in four blocks, highly modelled and expressive, each with their own identity and strongly designed entrances.

St Leonards Apartments was developed over 1995-96 on a lower budget. There are two blocks of apartments, each four stories, in a domestic environment, set at ninety degrees to each other. Stage one is over 40 walk-up apartments in one, two and three-storeyed configurations, accessed off four stairwells, with car-parking in a semi-basement. Stage two is about half that size. All units have maximum amenity: gardens or generous terraces for all, most apartments have views in at least two directions, there are no corridors. Rooms are large with high ceiling heights, abundant natural light and ventilation.

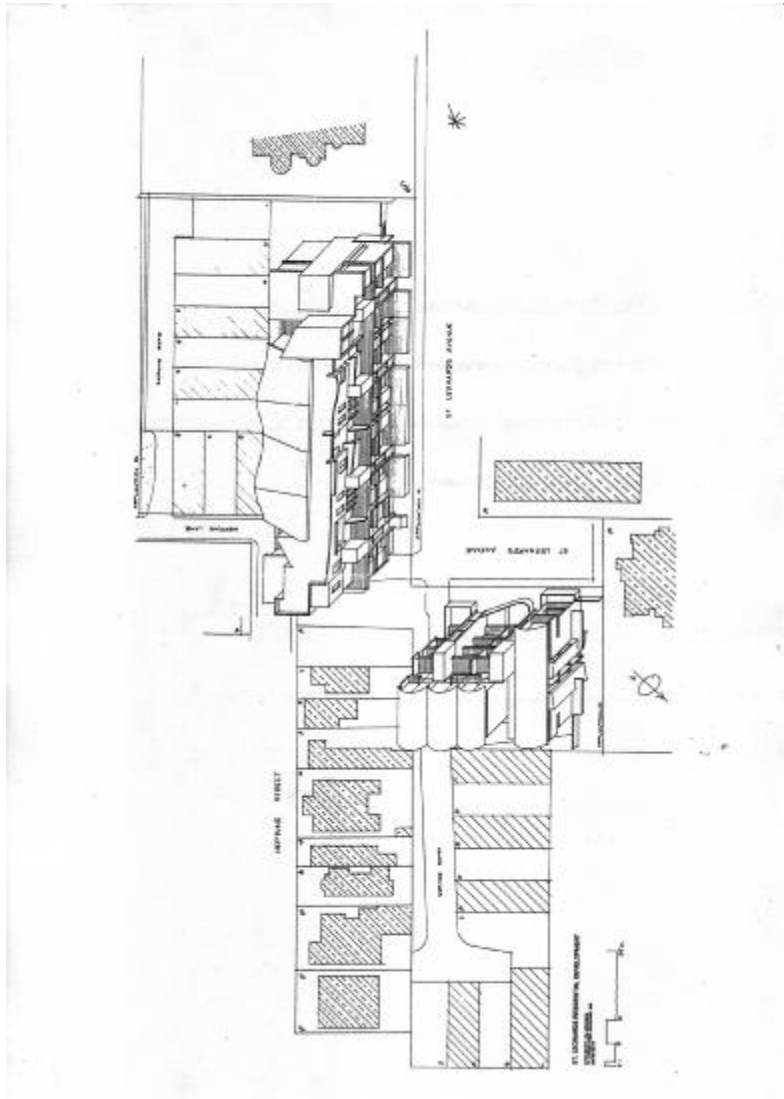
Façades are very interesting: deeply modelled and vigorously articulated with a rich variety of natural materials: manganese bricks galvanised steel and strong colours. Stairwells articulate the long façade into individual elements and at stage two, by the vaulted sail-like roofs, which somehow do not overwhelm the single storied Edwardian house adjacent at number 15. Further fine Modernist townhouses by other architects have followed, erected over the past five years in this enclave.

Richard Peterson: A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People

An early critical discussion of the St Leonards Apartments, after the completion of Stage one, was written by Professor Leon van Schaik:

In late 1995, after increasingly desperate searching for accommodation, he and his family moved into St Leonards. He notes how Katsalidis draws on European apartment forms and the 'commonsense layouts of better 19th century housing in Melbourne.

Richard Peterson: A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People



Extracted from Richard Peterson: "A Place of Sensuous Resort: Buildings of St Kilda and Their People"
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St Leonards Residential Development Plan, 1996

...Katsalidis moves with the calm knowledge that there are precedents that work. He is also informed by a clear understanding of the lives that can be led in the inner city - derived from family experiences over a long period.

Van Schaik himself has played a particularly significant role in debates on architectural practice and urbanity internationally, in Asia and in Melbourne. Coming to Melbourne from practice and post-graduate study in South Africa and the UK, he studied under Richard Hamilton in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Alvin Boyarsky at the Architectural Association (AA) in London. Appointed Dean of the Faculty of the Constructed Environment at RMIT University, he became Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University, but still remained professor of architecture.

His pervasive influence has been through his entrepreneurial teaching, his prolific writing (72 publications listed by 2002) and particularly his patronage. This has led to an impressive portfolio of recent significant architectural commissions at RMIT, which appears to have in turn influenced some comparable architecture at Monash, Deakin and the University of Melbourne.

Since, St Leonards, in 1996 Katsalidis' Silo Residential Apartments at 22 Abinger Street, Richmond turned the reinforced concrete wheat silo of Daly's Malthouse, which had defeated previous developers' capacities, into a sculpturally powerful block, with fabulous views.

But in 1997, Nation Fender Katsalidis' (NFK) design for a 38-storied tower at the Esplanade Hotel (14) alienated thousands of St Kilda residents and Espy fans, who had doubtless been happier with the low-scale St Leonards Apartments.

Republic Tower Apartments, 299 Queen Street (1999) is an even stronger landmark, in which Katsalidis acted as developer as well as architect. Even at low budget, St Leonard small mosaic artworks enliven the entrances (the artist is not known). Katsalidis is the only Australian architect who has consistently included works of art on the exterior of his buildings, a sculptured glass screen at 171 La Trobe Street (1991), Peter Corlett's bronze figures at Melbourne Terrace, Christine O'Loughlin's bas-relief 'Cultural Rubble' at the Ian Potter Museum of Art (1999) and the late sculptor Akio Makgawa's last work at the Sidney Myer Asia Centre (2001), both at the University of Melbourne. At Republic, NFK established the Visible Art Foundation to curate a changing sequence of works on that building and at Hero. These have been significant works, sometimes controversial in their installation, sometimes in their rejection for installation.

Other major apartment blocks followed for Katsalidis and NFK: Spring Street (1999); Elgin Street, Carlton; Wills Street and Hero, Russell Street (2001) in Melbourne's CBD; World

Tower in Sydney (2000-); HM@S at Beach Street, Port Melbourne (2002); ERA Townhouses in Dover Street, Richmond and presently under construction the 88-storied Eureka Tower (2002-05), at City Road (corner Southgate Avenue), Southbank, the tallest residential tower in the world.

Nonda Katsalidis was born in Athens in 1951. He graduated from the University of Melbourne in architecture in 1976 and gained his Masters degree from RMIT University in 1992. From 1979-83 he practised alone. An early commission was a family business, Cafe Byzantium at 312 Drummond Street, Carlton (c1980, now without its brilliant colours as Donnini's), then the Deutscher Gallery and residence, 68 Drummond Street (near Queensberry Street), Carlton (1983) and Metro Brasserie (now Spleen), 41 Bourke Street (corner Meyers Place, 1984). That year, Katsalidis and Partners was formed which joined with Greenhatch and Partners in 1984 as Axia Pty. Ltd., until 1990 when Katsalidis Pty.Ltd. emerged.

Katsalidis and Axia developed the Argus Centre, 300 La Trobe Street, offices and car-park and 171 La Trobe Street (corner Russell Street) offices, both in 1991 and the Bongiorno Group Offices, Level 2, 431 St Kilda Road. With Karl Fender and Bob Nation, NFK was established in 1996. Bendigo Art Gallery redevelopment (1995 -) was another institutional project at this time, unconventional for the firm, yet sensitive to its historic context and a dramatic experience. The firm has now consolidated as Fender Katsalidis Associates.

As the firm has continued to act as not only architect, but also developer for ever larger buildings since 1995, predominantly residential, there has been an expectation that its design sensitivity and formal invention would decline, but to date it has not. There was no opposition from the National Trust to the development of the extraordinary Eureka Tower.

On July 20, 2002, The Victorian Minister for Planning, the Honourable Mary Delahunty, MP announced her preferred approach in medium density apartment design. Two out of the three preferred examples were NFK designs: St Leonards Avenue and Melbourne Terrace. Brett Gallagher, director of Sightlines the co-developer of St Leonards responded in *The Age* that the 'outcomes the Minister desires can no longer be achieved, since the introduction of *ResCode* and its view of neighbourhood character. He continued:

When Dimity Reed, professor of architecture at RMIT University, talked about 'neighbourhood character' in her evidence for the St Leonards project in VCAT, she talked about how the design grew out of the architectural history and design culture of St Kilda to produce a building of it's time. Today the phrase 'neighbourhood character' has become code for keeping things as they are. The ethos is exclusionary and anti-change.

I believe that several recent exciting contemporary, small to medium-scale developments have demonstrated that this is not presently true in St Kilda, nor has it ever been. It would be a sad day for the expression of our contemporary culture if it were.

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