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Los Angeles Court 50 Brighton Road, Ripponlea

The Californian 'Bungalow Court' and the English 'cul-de-sac' were first derided in Australia as 'dead ends'.

A design for a bungalow court by John Gawler was published in the *Australian Home Builder* in February 1923. It has a gated entry flanked by rockeries and a further rockery within a turning circle. Garages are grouped at the end, separated by a fashionable pergola. Presumably it was never built. It took a swish name like 'Los Angeles Court' with its whiff of recently fashionable Hollywood glamour, to lure homebuyers in 1927. This estate was laid out on the site of G. Brunning & Son's St Kilda Nurseries, one of Australia's most important plant nurseries and seed merchants.

George Brunning (1830-93), was born at Lowestoft, Suffolk and established his nursery initially at the corner of Argyle and Inkerman Streets in 1860. In 1862 he moved to a far larger site in Brighton Road next to the Grosvenor Hotel, until this was subdivided for housing in 1884. He moved the nursery further south again between Albion and Maryville Streets and on 1.6 hectares on his old site. It was developed as a generous Victorian house with outbuildings and a series of gabled glasshouses. His brother and three sons joined the business.

In 1889, he acquired William Adamson's extremely popular *The Australian Gardener*, first published in 1854 and revised over a hundred years in 34 editions, thereafter by George's son, Leslie, who wrote many other gardening books.

George was unusually fussy about correct botanical nomenclature. He brought the *Schinus molle* (Pepper tree) to Australia, popular in St Kilda and promoted *Cupressus macrocarpa* (Monterey Cypress). In 1927 the *Argus* claimed that the Cypress hedge around Brunning's Nursery was the largest in Victoria.

Brunning's Nursery was sold for £26,000.00 in 1926. The Brunnings Estate was then surveyed and subdivided by the Brunnings Subdivisional Coy, of 96 High Street, St Kilda in 1927 into 53 blocks. 13 blocks are in Los Angeles Court and six in Brighton Road, with others in Somers Street, part of Albion and Maryville Streets, and Moores Street (west side).

In Los Angeles Court and Brighton Road alone, at least 17 comfortable and stylish houses were built over the next 11 years, including 48, 50, 52, 58, 64 and 66 Brighton Road; 4, 5, 8, 10 & 15 Los Angeles Court, and 17, 19, 20, 22 & 23 Monkstadt Avenue. It is hardly a

true court, but rather a partial closure of its east end, with a low brick wall and landscaping, barring all but pedestrian traffic through into Monkstadt Avenue. This was actually a traditional practice in more urban contexts. Queen Anne's Gate in London, was once similarly divided, presumably to reduce traffic noise, early in the eighteenth century.

Los Angeles Court is the first known cul-de-sac in Melbourne and probably Australia. Others followed: Rothersey Avenue, Brighton; Torrington Avenue, Canterbury, Bruce Court, Elsternwick and Sidwell Court, Hawthorn (1932) and Saxil Tuxen's 'glorious garden subdivision' of Corsewell Close, Hawthorn (1938). All these were on the estates of large nineteenth century mansions, broken up for sale. They had concrete roads, lamp standards and underground power.

But the houses in Los Angeles Court were targeted at comfortably middle (if not upper middle) class people. In 1933, real estate agent Albert Victor Jennings launched his completely serviced Hillcrest Estate in Caulfield, for more ordinary people. His Beauville Estate, Murrumbeena (1934-35); Beaumont (1937) and Beauview (1939) estates in Ivanhoe followed, before World War II. At Beaumont, there are actually five cul-de-sacs, but these avoided the necessity otherwise for wastefully deep blocks.

But built ten years earlier, Los Angeles Court was pitched a cut above these, and for wealthier owners. Five of the houses in Brighton Road and in the Court are with low front brick walls, fully serviced and individually designed by fashionable architects: Leslie J.W. Reed (48 Brighton Road, commenced 1937, a rare semi-detached in this estate), Arthur W. Plaisted, no 58 (1927-28); G.W. Vanheems, (no 66, 1920-21); Schreiber & Johnson (4 Los Angeles Court, 1930-31); and H. Geoffrey Bottoms (Besanoo, no 5, 1932-33).

The first built, Nos 50 and 52 Brighton Road were completed in 1927, for Los Angeles Court Pty. Ltd. Two further houses were built in that year (Nos 8 and 10), but then the Great Depression set in and only one further house (no 4 in 1930) was built over the next five years, apart from two smaller houses in Monkstadt Avenue (no 22, 1929 and no 20, 1931), where development of three further houses continued until 1938. More modest houses were built in Albion and Maryville Streets.

Architectural styles are generally quite eclectic in their sources and stylistically diverse: no 52 Brighton Road and no 9 (1932) are Old English, with black and white timbered gables. Nos 8 and 10 and no 50 Brighton Road (all 1927) and no 5 (1932) are a kind of Colonial Bungalow with Georgian columns and small-paned windows; no 4 (1930) has the Hispanic Baroque of the Spanish Mission manner and the two latest, no 48 Brighton Road and no 15 in the Court (1938) are sleekly Moderne, the former with interestingly patterned brickwork and the latter, smooth rendered and white painted.

Even before the First World War in 1913, house plans were first published for the delectation and interest of the general public in *The Real Property Annual* (1913-21) and *The Salon* (1913-37), then between the wars in the *Home* (1920-42), *Australian Homes*, and particularly successfully in *The Australian Home Beautiful* (1926-). These were the

organs which first popularised the continuing weekend sport of house style-spotting and plan-hunting by the general public.

Already, home buyers were aware of the two West Coast American styles: Californian Bungalow and Spanish Mission. Bungalows boasted natural materials: stained timbers and shingles, natural stone, massive timbers and low pitched nesting roofs, with deep, shady eaves, so appropriate for Australian conditions. Mission was rendered, with Cordoba tiles, parapets and arcades with twisted columns, Hispanic Baroque details and wrought iron, set in gardens of cactus and pampas grass. Limerick Lodge, no 58 Brighton Road (by designed by architect Arthur Plaisted in 1927) is a very fine example of this style.

From England came Moderne, whether Jazz or Streamlined, with smooth white render, steel windows, shiny dark Manganese bricks, nautical touches like round corners and portholes, cantilevered slabs, flat roofs and parapets, with geometric Art Deco decorative elements. In its purist form, this became European Modernism, first at Woy Woy flats in 1935-36 (42), but this severe style was not yet popular for family houses and there is none of that in Los Angeles Court.



A Los Angeles Court residence, 2002

Interestingly, all of the Los Angeles Court houses are detached: there are no flats, or even town-houses. It is important that this character, unusual for St Kilda be maintained and pressure to allow the intrusion of multi-unit development be resisted. Several have attics,

but only one is full-blown two-storied. The impression is of the classic Los Angeles bungalow court transposed direct to Brighton Road.

In Europe, one family, one house could mean pairs, groups, or rows, but despite the popularity of flats in St Kilda a kilometre away, here it was felt that family houses needed to be set in their own separate garden. Even the great father of Australian planning, Sir John Sulman regarded the two-storied pairs and row houses in Hampstead Garden Suburb, north London as 'hardly desirable'. In 1913, the leading German planner, Werner Hegemann was shown terraced houses in Sydney regarded as needing demolition. His guide, John Garlick later remarked that 'the very type of house I was condemning was...the ideal that the German town-improvers were striving to reach'.

Setbacks from the street, behind (unlike America) the security of a front fence, were codified in Uniform Building Regulations throughout Victoria in 1946. For Australians, front gardens were essential and the real, domestic showcase, in a quiet street safe from traffic. This ideal was first most fully expressed in Victoria at Los Angeles Court.

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