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# Preshil, The Margaret Lyttle School



B7262 Preshil Tree House  
from south

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## Location

395 Barkers Road,, KEW VIC 3101 - Property No B7262

## Municipality

BOROONDARA CITY

## Level of significance

State

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H0072

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO6

## Heritage Listing

National Trust

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - July 19, 2005

### STATEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE:

What is significant? Preshil is Australia's longest surviving progressive school. It was established in the 1930s by Margaret J R Lyttle and still follows the educational philosophies and practices established by her then, which

were in opposition to the traditional teaching methods of the time. The school moved to a house on the present site in 1937, and in 1960 Kevin Borland, whose children attended the school, was asked to design a school hall. The pupils were closely involved in the design process. Over the following decade he designed five more buildings, which were laid out in an informal and non-hierarchical way on the site. The school was designed to accommodate a particular style of active learning, and the child-scaled and multi-purpose buildings embody this. The school is a reflection of the participatory design methods that were being used in architecture at the time, and also of the contemporary interest in vernacular architectural techniques and materials. In 1972 Borland was awarded an RIAA Victorian chapter Bronze medal for the school buildings. In 2003 the school was included as one of the thirty-seven best projects in Victoria to have been awarded RIAA medals.

The Preshil school includes six buildings designed by Kevin Borland and his office between 1962 and 1972. The first was a school hall for multi-purpose use, a concrete block and timber building with an octagonal plan and an intricate timber ceiling with skylights above. A classroom for pre-school children was added in 1964 to the original house on the site, and incorporated a bedroom and sitting room of the house. The small wooden 1960s children's chairs are still used. The 'tree house' has two classrooms separated by a timber deck with a tree growing through; it is elevated, and has space for woodwork classes and sandpits underneath. Multi-purpose 'tutorial' classrooms (for tutorials, music, films, etc) were added in 1969, with P Cohen as assistant architect. A long rectangular timber building contains multi-purpose rooms to provide private and community spaces, and has a wide verandah along the north side. The 'home rooms' (1972, J Kenny, assistant architect) is an irregularly planned timber building with spaces on different levels and with a mezzanine for children to retreat to.

How is it significant? Preshil, is significant for architectural, historical and social reasons at a State level.

Why is it significant? Preshil is architecturally significant as a notable example of the work of the prominent Melbourne architect Kevin Borland in the 1960s. It is an outstanding example of the contemporary interest of Melbourne architects in inventive timber architecture, which was inspired by vernacular buildings. It also reflects the participatory design process that was beginning to become more common in architectural practices at the time. It is also significant as a reflection of the importance that began to be attached in the 1960s to the design of schools and the form of the learning environment.

Preshil is historically significant as a reflection of the social changes that were occurring during the 1960s, with a strongly emerging counterculture and a dissatisfaction with traditional middle class values, which included the conservatism of traditional middle class schools and their educational methods. It is historically significant as the only progressive school in Melbourne to have survived from the period of interest in progressive schools in the 1930s.

Preshil School is socially significant as one of the most important progressive school in Melbourne, where a number of prominent and successful Victorians were educated.

Classified: 27/09/2004

Hermes Number 71605

Property Number

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## Physical Description 1

The Preshil complex comprises six buildings designed by Borland and his office between 1962 and 1972:

. School hall for multi-purpose use (1962). This has an innovative octagonal plan with an octagonal roof offset against the alignment of the walls, creating a lively play of forms. The form of the hall, and the subsequent manner in which it can be used, represents a major departure from the more common nave-like halls designed for schools. The expressed beams span both the hall and the sheltered bays on the external perimeter. The walls are of grey concrete blocks and the roof is clad in steel.

. Classroom for pre-school children (1964). This is rectangular plan timber building attached to the original house on the site, and incorporates what were once a bedroom and sitting room of the house. A long classroom space has an elevated verandah along its length, separated from it by sliding glass doors. The small wooden 1960s children's chairs are still used.

. The tree house (1965), comprising two elevated rectangular timber classrooms with timber bays along one side and with long windows shaded by timber slats. The two rooms are separated by a timber deck, through which a

tree rises. The space beneath is used for woodwork classes, and for sandpits.

. Multi-purpose 'tutorial' classrooms (for tutorials, music, films, etc) (1969. P Cohen, assistant architect);

. Multi-purpose rooms in a long rectangular building with an open verandah along the north side. This includes two classrooms with a workroom, to provide private and community spaces, and is the largest teaching space. The classrooms are large, and spaces can be divided off by means of folding doors.

. Home rooms (1972. J Kenny, assistant architect), an irregularly planned timber building with several open spaces on different levels linked by steps, and with a mezzanine reached by ladders, which provides a more private space for children to retreat to. The west wall zig-zags to provide spaces for individual activities.

The buildings are arranged informally around the school site. The layout is labyrinthine, non-hierarchical and non-institutional. Many of the paths and spaces are child-scaled, and tend to discriminate against adults. Between the buildings are mature trees which shade the buildings, play spaces, a small garden plot and pet enclosure, and cubby houses.

Borland's buildings 'have their root in the Australian vernacular, articulated through the use of triangular and hexagonal geometries ... They embody a mix of small retreat spaces and lofts with a strong inside-out relationship' [Preshil. Uniquely Different, p 9]. Several of the buildings are elevated to provide play spaces beneath. The rooms are well-lit, with light streaming in through clerestory windows and walls of sliding glass doors. Internal spaces can be divided by folding doors to allow for different uses. There are many small spaces attached to the main spaces, and elevated platforms which the children can reach by ladders.

The various buildings at Preshil are also of interest in demonstrating the development of Borland's architecture between 1962, when his timber architecture was perhaps more closely related to that of Robin Boyd, and 1972. Borland's works are a reflection of the changes which were occurring in Melbourne architecture during that period, and document not only the progression of Borland's work but of local architectural fashion.

## **Intactness**

The school buildings are all intact, and used as originally intended, with only minor additions since 1980.

*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*