

OAKLEIGH MOTEL



Oakleigh Motel_front view_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh Motel_sign_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh Motel_units ext_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh Motel_eastern block_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh Motel_cafe end_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh motel_bedroom_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh Motel_bathroom_KJ_Spet 08



Oakleigh Motel_front door_KJ_Sept 08



Oakleigh Motel_rear of reception_KJ_Sept 08



PROV H2193 oakleigh motel plan

Location

1650 DANDENONG ROAD OAKLEIGH EAST, MONASH CITY

Municipality

MONASH CITY

Level of significance

Registered

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2193

Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO23

VHR Registration

May 7, 2009

Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

What is significant?

The Oakleigh Motel was the first motel built in Victoria. It was designed in 1956 and opened in 1957. It was located on the Princes Highway, the main road into Melbourne from Gippsland, in what were then the outskirts of Melbourne. The motel was designed by builder and draftsman James Miller, principal of the Tec Draft Machine & Drafting Service. The design was likely to have been influenced by the owner, Cyril Lewis, who had travelled in the United States, staying in and inspecting many motels there. The motel was a new building type, inspired by American models, and was associated with the post-war boom in car ownership. The rooms provided more comfort than the old hotels and guest houses, and were self contained and private. Each room had its own bathroom and telephone, and had air conditioning, sound-proofing, wall-to-wall carpet and Venetian blinds. The single-storey nature of the room blocks and the planning of the site allowed patrons of the motel to park their car at the door of their unit.

Signage and electric lighting were closely tied to modern design in post-war architecture, with businesses such as shops, motels and service stations taking full advantage of both to advertise the place and its function. The excesses of commercialism typified by the Oakleigh Motel's signage were deplored by Robin Boyd in his 1960 book *The Australian Ugliness*, but became more acceptable in the 1980s with movements such as pop art and post-modernism.

The Oakleigh Motel, when built, was a model of 1950s modernity, with its butterfly roofs, sloping window walls, sleek signage and hangar-like entrance. It retains a high degree of intactness and many external and internal features remain in-situ.

The motel includes three separate single storey buildings. The front one on Dandenong Road contains a drive-in entry canopy, an office, manager's residence and a restaurant. A high sloping steel roof supported by zig-zag struts covers the drive-in entry next to the reception area, which has the motel's name etched into the glass entry door. Near the door to the reception area is a key return slot and a small glass sign labelled 'OFFICE'. The reception area itself includes original fixtures and fittings and a number of early photographs of the motel. The signage on the office section is a prominent part of the design. Above the office area is a large white sloping panel with the words 'OAKLEIGH MOTEL' spelt out in red letters, set forward of the wall and illuminated at night. After the initial construction a large rectangular neon sign was added on the roof above this with the word 'MOTEL' and an arrow (now removed) down one side with the word 'OAKLEIGH'. The restaurant has outward sloping glass windows, and later signage on the roof, and it was extended in 1959.

Behind are two buildings containing forty-three similar rooms. The two motel room blocks have butterfly roofs, and contain two parallel rows of rooms, each angled to create a zig-zag facade. The interiors are substantially intact in terms of plan form and the bathrooms, with their oblique wall arrangement, retain their original pale grey mosaic floor tiling. The linen room and phone booth remain somewhat intact and the service alley between the parallel rows of rooms contains the remnants of the original air-conditioning system and the centralised toilet flushing system.

How is it significant?

The Oakleigh Motel is of architectural, historical and aesthetic significance to the State of Victoria.

Why is it significant?

The Oakleigh Motel is historically significant as the first motel to be built in Victoria and as the only surviving example of the initial boom in motel development in the Melbourne metropolitan area between 1955 and 1959. It represents a new type of building, associated with the economic and social changes occurring in Victoria after World War II, particularly the dramatic rise in family travel by private car in the 1950s.

The Oakleigh Motel is architecturally significant as an unusually intact example of 1950s modernism in Victoria, and is aesthetically significant as an example of the American 'Googie' style of architecture. It is also significant as the earliest example in Victoria of a new building type, which was designed to be visually striking, and used prominent signage and lighting to advertise the place and its function.

Permit Exemptions

General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

Specific Exemptions:

General Conditions: 1. All exempted alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place or object. **General Conditions:** 2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of works that original or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place or object are revealed which relate to the significance of the place or object, then the exemption covering such works shall cease and Heritage Victoria shall be notified as soon as possible. **General Conditions:** 3. If there is a conservation policy and plan endorsed by the Executive Director, all works shall be in accordance with it. **Note:** The existence of a Conservation Management Plan or a Heritage Action Plan endorsed by the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria provides guidance for the management of the heritage values associated with the site. It may not be necessary to obtain a heritage permit for certain works specified in the management plan. **General Conditions:** 4. Nothing in this determination prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions. **General Conditions:** 5. Nothing in this determination exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authorities where applicable. **Minor Works :** **Note:** Any Minor Works that in the opinion of the Executive Director will not adversely affect the heritage significance of the place may be exempt from the permit requirements of the Heritage Act. A person proposing to undertake minor works may submit a proposal to the Executive Director. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed works will not adversely affect the heritage values of the site, the applicant may be exempted from the requirement to obtain a heritage permit. If an applicant is uncertain whether a heritage permit is required, it is recommended that the permits co-ordinator be contacted.

Construction dates	1957,
Heritage Act Categories	Registered place,
Hermes Number	43155
Property Number	

History

CONTEXTUAL HISTORY

[information taken from Graeme Davison, *Car Wars*, (Crow's Nest [NSW] 2004) and from the NT nomination report]

With the post-war boom in car ownership Australia imported from America a repertoire of new urban forms: the interstate highway, the roadside diner, the garage and the carport, the parking meter and the multi-level parking station, the motel, the drive-in theatre, the service station and the automobile-based shopping centre (Davison, *Car Wars*, p 79). Robin Boyd coined the term 'Austerica' to describe the new landscape, and the Australian willingness to adopt what was cheapest and nastiest in American culture.

The first self-proclaimed 'motel' had had appeared in California in 1926, and by 1948 there were 26,000 in the USA. They were generally located on the edge of the town. Being more anonymous than hotels, they had a disreputable reputation, dealing in what Americans called the 'hot pillow trade'. The first Holiday Inn opened in Memphis in 1952, the first of a chain of motels aimed at the family market that still trades today, and helped to transform the motel into a respectable tourist stop-over.

The car changed the nature of family holidays, allowing families to travel wherever they wished, and the caravan, the camping ground and the motel provided more informal accommodation than the hotel or guest house.

Although Davison notes that the first Australian Motel was the American Motel at Bathurst, which opened in 1954, according to the Trust's nomination report it was Penzance Motor Inn in Tasmania, which opened in 1949. It contained a concrete block restaurant with a honeymoon suite attached and fifty individual chalets. Being a themed establishment, all the staff were dressed up as pirates. By 1954 there were still only about a dozen motels in Australia, generally with American names, reflecting the strong American influence. Motels with names like The Niagara, The Californian, the Atlantic or the Bel Air dotted the landscape.

'The typical Australian motel of the 1950s was a low-slung ensemble of single-storey or box-like rooms, grouped around a courtyard and entered by a small reception office and breakfast room. All rooms were equipped with electric jugs, toasters, irons and sometimes a stove. Unlike the grand hotels of an earlier generation which had created an aura of the exotic and the opulent, the motel impressed by its familiarity, by being simply a home, albeit an up-to-date home, away from home.' (Davison, pp 98-9)

Signage

[information taken from Julie Willis, 'Signs of the Times', in Stephen, Goad & McNamara (eds), *Modern Times. The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia*, Carlton [Vic] 2008, pp 208-213.]

As Willis explains 'The twentieth century saw the rapid rise in the use of signs, signage and lettering in the built and designed environment. Another modern invention, electricity, likewise played an important role in reconfiguring the view of street and city. Lighting and signage were intimately tied to modern design in the twentieth century, especially in the realms of architecture and advertising.'

'From the 1930s onwards towns and cities were increasingly emblazoned with a multitude of signs and symbols, often neon-lit to make their mark both night and day.' 'Advertising and branding were part of the demonstration of progress and were often intimately tied into the design of buildings.'

Lettering was seen as an appropriate addition for modern buildings. It replaced to some extent the ornament of earlier styles, and had a functional purpose in advertising the place and its function. Letters set forward from the wall surface or in silhouette above a roof decorated buildings without breaking up the wall surface.

Electric lighting meant that businesses could be highly visible even at night. Commercial strips took full advantage of this, and shops, milk bars, supermarkets, motels and petrol stations lit up the suburban streets, each with their own logos and lettering.

By the 1960s the manifestations of modernisation, such as overhead electric wires, signage and commercial strips, on the Australian urban environment were seen as a 'blight on any nascent design culture' and Robin Boyd

in particular attacked these excesses, which he labelled featurism, in his 1960 book *The Australian Ugliness*. While the inclusion of discrete and elegant lettering was an acceptable part of modern design, the excesses of commercialism were not. However with movements such as pop art and the post-modernism inspired by Robert Venturi in America, many architects 'rejected the prescriptive refinement of modernism to embrace the "messy vitality" of the modern urban environment'.

HISTORY OF PLACE

The land where the Oakleigh Motel now stands was originally the site of a Cobb & Co stable, and later the Mulgrave Arms Hotel, on Dandenong Road in what were then the outskirts of Melbourne and the outer edge of the suburb of Oakleigh.

The original architectural drawings show that the front block at least was designed in 1955, with the design completed in 1956. The motel opened in 1957, opposite the turning point of the Olympic marathon event, held a few months before. It was the brainchild of Cyril J Lewis, well-known in the car trade, who had toured the United States, living in and inspecting the motels and gathering ideas for the one he planned to build in Melbourne in time for the Olympics. Cyril wrote to the then Premier Henry Bolte for financial assistance to enable him to build before the 1956 Olympics, but this was unsuccessful, and the motel opened in 1957, the year after the Olympics.

The designer of the building is not known. Lewis, with his knowledge of American motels, may have had an influence on the design. The National Trust nomination report notes that James Earle, an architectural adviser to the Trust, believes that the designer was Lindsay Bunnett, a lecturer in the architecture department at RMIT. The architectural drawings were made by a drafting service, Tecdraft.

The motel was a model of modernity, from its sleek signage and hangar-like entrance to its air-conditioning and sound-proofing. 'Only a few cosmetic details, like the waratah flowers in the dining room carpets, could be described as authentically Australian; what, if anything, was novel, was the way in which the elements of the American prototype were adapted, recombined and sometimes omitted' (Davison, pp 99-100).

Lewis's advertisements in the *Royal Auto* magazine boasted that it was 'equal to America's best', and that 'every room is tastefully furnished with the most modern fittings, and every room is sound-proofed for slumber comfort'. The Oakleigh Motel signs were painted blue and red, advertising its American influence: 'You pay for your room on arrival and you are free to leave at any time during your stay without any further reference to the office'. Other signs spoke of modern comforts such as 'wall-to-wall carpets, Venetian blinds, the finest inner-sprung mattresses, flushing toilets, showers, hot and cold running water, wash-basins, telephone, electric iron'. Guests' cars were able to be parked at the door for easy access, described as 'your car in your bedroom'. With forty three air conditioned rooms boasting sound proofing and individual bathrooms, it was called a luxury motel, and promoted as 'Australia's most expensive Motel'.

The Oakleigh Motel was designed to be visually striking, with the most dominant element being the huge billboard-style sign, which was illuminated at night. The various angles and lightweight structure of the building are designed to impress with their modernity. The entry canopy is angled and supported by zig-zag struts, while the restaurant has a window wall angled out towards the passing traffic. The rooms behind are angled in order to provide some privacy from each other, as well as an exciting zig-zag effect. The building, with its prominent signage, is a local landmark.

By the time the motel opened the boom was about to begin. People wanted self-contained, private rooms, with modern luxuries and conveniences, values associated with the popularity of the car. It was predicted that American influenced neon signs and swimming pools with palms would soon be included in the motel design, and this did occur. Motels sprang up across the countryside, rising along with the increasing levels of car ownership in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1959 the dining room was extended in a similar style to the original, and doubled in size.

Assessment Against Criteria

a. Importance to the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history

The Oakleigh Motel was the first motel to be built in Victoria. It represents a new type of building, associated with the economic and social changes occurring in Victoria after World War II, particularly the dramatic rise in family

travel by private car in the 1950s.

- b. Possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history.
- c. Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Victoria's cultural history.
- d. Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places or environments.

The Oakleigh Motel is an unusually intact example of 1950s modernism in Victoria. It is the earliest example in Victoria of a new building type, which was designed to be visually striking and used prominent signage and lighting to advertise the place and its function.

- e. Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics.
- f. Importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period.
- 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 their continuing and developing cultural traditions.
- h. Special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Victoria's history.

Plaque Citation

Opened in 1957, this intact example of 1950s modernism with its striking advertising signage was the first motel in Victoria. Motels were introduced with the dramatic increase in car ownership and family travel in the 1950s.

Extent of Registration

1. All the land marked L1 on Diagram 2193 held by the Executive Director, being all of the land described in Certificates of Title Volume 8079 Folio 675 and Volume 8671 Folio 508.
2. All the buildings marked B1, B2 & B3 on Diagram 2193 held by the Executive Director.

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/>