
Baker House & Baker-Dower House

Location

305 - 307 Long Forest Road,, BACCHUS MARSH VIC 3340 - Property No B7292

Municipality

MOORABOOL SHIRE

Level of significance

State

Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2118

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - August 24, 2007

What is significant? The Baker House group consists of the main Baker House, Baker-Dower house and the Library/studio, on a large scrubby bush block that merges with the surrounding Long Forest Nature Conservation Reserve, the only area of mallee bushland south of the Dividing Range.

The main house was built for teacher and mathematician Michael Baker and his family, which eventually grew to include five children. He commissioned one of Australia's foremost architects, and best-known architectural writer, Robin Boyd to design the house in 1964, and it was completed in 1966. The Baker-Dower House was built for his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Sticklen, in 1968, and was also later occupied by Mr. Baker's own mother. A library/studio, designed by Roy Grounds (later Sir) was added in the early 1970s to house Mr Baker's ever growing book collection and a large art studio. A large amount of the property was subdivided off in the 1970s to form part of the Long Forest Nature Conservation Area. Altered only in minor ways, the houses and studio were sold after 42 years occupation by the Baker family in 2006.

All the structures feature massive fieldstone walls, exposed internally as well as dominating external elevations. The walls of the main house are of mudstone, laid in a pattern of large and small blocks typical of the region of the Italian born stonemason employed for the project. The other two structures use stone quarried on site by Mr Baker himself.

The main house is essentially a square within a square courtyard plan, but the exterior is dominated by the large circular stone drums which punctuate each side, giving it a low fortress quality. The horizontality formed by the edges of the low pyramidal metal deck roof which overhangs on all sides is counterpointed by a prominent vertical stone chimney. Timber framed window walls run along each side between L-shaped stone wall elements

which frame external space in each corner in plan. There is a central courtyard, which is itself ringed by a thick wall of service spaces and bedrooms, all again in fieldstone. The main rooms occupy the space between this internal ring of rooms and the external window wall. Other internal walls are lightweight timber framed elements. The floors are polished concrete, and the ceiling, following the slope of the roof up to the centre, is lined with straw panels. The angle of the roof is continued by pyramidal framing which spans the courtyard, and originally supported flywire. The courtyard is itself a quiet enclosure, with small windows to some of the service rooms, the only large windows being to either side of the massive central stone fireplace/chimney of the lounge, and features exotic flowering plants and creepers.

The Dower house is also based on a square plan, defined by a low pyramidal flat metal deck roof and window walls, but is overlaid on free-form curving stone walls. These flow in and out of the square, forming parts of bedroom and dressing room walls, and enclose a circular kitchen within the house, and water tank outside the line of the roof. Originally two of the walls were intended to continue curving into the bushland, almost meeting and embracing an ovoid area of vineyard.

The library/studio is a rectangular structure with stone walling similar to the Dower house up to door height, topped by a clerestory window strip on one end, with a thick flat deeply overhang roof providing shading. At the opposite end the roof tilts up at an angle, providing a large south facing highlight window for the studio, with fibro cement wall between the roof and the stone wall below on the sides. The roof in the library is supported by exposed timber trusses, and the extensive timber shelving is supported on nails through vertical timber dowells, a system devised by Mr Baker himself.

How is it significant? The Baker House including the main house, the Baker-Dower House and Library are significant for aesthetic/architectural reasons at the State level.

Why is it significant? The Baker House and the Baker-Dower Houses are significant as some of the most architecturally inventive works in Australia in the 1960s. This significance is enhanced as they were designed by Robin Boyd, one of Australia's most prominent architects of the 1950s and 1960s, and also the most significant architectural critic and writer of the period.

The main Baker House is architecturally significant for its successful combination of a number of design approaches and influences, a hallmark of Boyd's architectural practice. With its massive stone walls and particularly the cylindrical stone elements strung around the perimeter, it has the defensive qualities of a low castle from the exterior. This is combined with a large degree of openness to the outside environment through light-weight glass window walls set under the overhanging roof. This is all drawn together through the use of a dominant yet simple geometric plan based on squares within squares, softened by curved corners. Boyd's interest in the courtyard form is displayed in the central square, in this case creating a stone-lined outdoor room roofed (originally) enclosed by fly-wire, filled with exotic flowering plants and creepers in contrast to the native bush outside. The lack of a formal garden outside the house displayed his growing interest in the native Australian environment.

The low square form, use of verandas and roofed open spaces, and circular forms reminiscent of water tanks, references the traditional Australian farmhouse, while the plan is radical in its use of solid and lightweight elements, and free-standing solid stone walls.

It is significant for the manner in which structural and functional components are brought together, a typical Boyd technique. The twelve stone cylinders support the roof and also act as water tanks and household storage space. The Baker-Dower house is architecturally significant for taking the 'free plan' to its logical conclusion, by the use of free-form lines of stone walls as the main structural elements and design generator. This free form in planning however, is contrasted by the rectilinear geometry of a square roof and external window walls following this geometry. With its curved solid stone walls, and over-arching square roof, it also explores the combination of stolid fortress-like elements with the Australian homestead characteristics of the main Baker House, but a very different expression results.

The library/studio is significant as a design complementary to the houses in the use of stone walling, and as a design by noted architect Roy Grounds. The dowell-and-nail shelving system of the library is unusual, and significant for having been designed by Baker Himself.

Classified: 23/10/2006

Other Names Strickland House, Michael Baker House,

Hermes Number 71702

Property Number

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