

IDENTIFIER	NANGA GNULLE	Citation No	N/A
Other name/s	Green House (former)	VicRoads ref	608 E9
Address	40 Harley Street STRATHDALE	Date/s	1973-1974 (house) 1993-2000 (cottages/chapel)
Designer/s	Alistair Knox & Associates (1973) Robert Marshall (1973, 1993-94)	Builder/s	Max Mathews (house) Ted Carruthers (cottages/chapel)



Photograph by Built Heritage, 21 February 2017



Location map and proposed extent of HO

Heritage Group	Residential building (private)	Condition	Good
Heritage Category	House	Intactness	Excellent (few changes)
Significance	Local		
Recommendation	Include on heritage overlay schedule as individual heritage place		
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> External Paint Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> Interior Alteration Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> Tree Controls

History

Dating from 1973-74, *Nanga Gnulle* was built for schoolteacher Robin (Rob) Green and his wife Margaret (Peg), to the design of Alistair Knox, leading exponent of Victoria's post-war mudbrick revival. Occupying a landscaped five-acre site, it is the largest of six buildings that the Greens built there from c.1971 to c.2000, the more recent of which pertain to the property's use (from 1987) as a B&B and wedding/conference venue.

The son of a berry farmer from Monbulk, Rob Green initially followed in the family business but, when it became unprofitable, parlayed his qualifications and experience in agriculture to become a teacher in the technical school system. Based for a time in Mildura, the family transferred to Bendigo by the late 1960s. While the Greens initially occupied a rented house in Bendigo North, they intended to build a house of their own. In 1971, Rob and Peg acquired five acres in Harley Street. Formerly used as holding paddock for livestock awaiting sale at auction, the land was cleared and unfenced, bisected by a gully with a watercourse. The first improvement made to the land was the reconfiguration of the watercourse to create a small dam.

The Greens considered themselves practical people and, keen for a house that they could build themselves, turned to Eltham-based designer Alistair Knox (1912-1986), a leading figure in the burgeoning trend towards self-built dwellings. A former bank clerk, Knox had commenced (but never completed) architectural studies after returning from wartime service. In 1948, he began experimenting with mudbrick as a solution to the post-war housing crisis. He soon developed a distinctive organic style that typically combined mudbrick with rough timber, brick, stone and slate (often salvaged from demolition sites). After designing early houses for brave clients (mostly artists and academics in the Eltham area), Knox's reputation rose and, from the later 1960s until his early death, was highly sought after. Active in local affairs (serving as an Eltham Shire councillor), he wrote several books and many articles, and also lectured. Two years before his death, Knox received an honorary Doctorate of Architecture for his unique contribution to design.

At the time the Greens commissioned their house, Knox ran a small home-based office in Eltham, assisted by two young architects, Robert Marshall and John Pizzey, who developed Knox's sketch plans into working drawings. According to Marshall, who had worked for Knox since graduating from Melbourne University in 1968, the Greens' project was unusual in that he had a greater hand in its design and, for the first time, was permitted by Knox to supervise the construction himself. Knox made at least one visit to the site, and Rob Green further recalls that, at an early stage of the project, Knox took him and Peg to see an earlier mudbrick house that he had designed in an outlying area; this could only have been the *Sunningdale* homestead at Murphy's Creek, near Tarnagulla. Dating from 1948, this was actually Knox's first mudbrick building.

Preparing to build their house, the Greens salvaged material from historic structures then being demolished around Bendigo. These included hand-made bricks from many houses, timber members from the railway bridge over the Campaspe River at Axedale (1887), and items from the Boom-style ANA Hall at 46 View Street (1893) such as timber from queen post trusses, lining boards and a large pair of panel doors. During a Tasmanian holiday, the family visited a ruined church at Variety Bay on Bruny Island, and brought back convict-made bricks from the 1840s. Back in Bendigo, the collection was stored in a gable-roofed brick shed that Rob built at the rear of the property in c.1972, which was the first structure to be built on the site. The items were catalogued and a list sent to Knox's office, with the request that the new house incorporate as much of the salvaged material as possible. Marshall recalls that, while Knox clients frequently requested that specific reclaimed items be integrated in their house designs, the sheer amount of material gathered by the Greens was exceptional. It thus became a major design influence: for example, the length of timber posts governed ceiling heights, while the dimensions of the panelled doors informed the height of the front wall.

Mudbrick production continued in parallel. Rob Green recalls that Robert Marshall visited Bendigo with colleague Pat Begg (not a member of Knox's staff, but rather of Eltham's broader community of mudbrick enthusiasts) to demonstrate the technique. Rob then had metal moulds made and, working at weekends and holidays over many months, he and his family produced about 2,500 bricks. Working drawings for the house were completed in early 1973. According to Rob, there was little opposition from the Shire Engineer who, while he had never encountered mudbrick construction before, was placated after Marshall intervened and explained that many such houses had been built in Eltham without problems. Max Matthews, the local builder engaged for the project, was similarly unfamiliar; Rob recalls that it was only after the two of them visited one of Knox's Eltham houses that Mathews appreciated what was required, and could proceed confidently thence. Rob, Peg and their four children moved into the finished house on Good Friday, 1974.

Subsequently, the Greens made few major changes to the house. In the mid-1980s, after their children had grown up and moved out, Rob and Peg decided to adapt the house for bed-and-breakfast accommodation (an idea yet untested in Bendigo, Rob notes), with Rob himself undertaking the works required to create en suite bathrooms to two surplus bedrooms. In parallel, the couple embarked upon a program to create an extensive garden landscape around the existing ponds. Designed by Rob (who drew from his agricultural experience and some research into landscape design), this included pathways, stone retaining walls, timber pergolas and a bridge. Completed by 1990, the garden won first prize in a local garden competition that year (and again the next year), and, over the next two decades, was regularly featured in the Open Garden Scheme.

In the 1990s, the Greens expanded their business by providing further purpose-built facilities. In the absence of Alistair Knox, who died in 1986, they turned to his former employee Robert Marshall, who prepared plans for two mudbrick buildings: an octagonal structure for weddings and conferences, and a freestanding block of B&B units. Marshall recalls that, in contrast to the house (which he considered to have an idiosyncratic and brutal character) the new buildings were designed to be less personal and more polished, befitting their commercial use and the broader public audience that would occupy them. While the sanctuary was built to Marshall's design in 1993-94, his scheme for units was abandoned; instead, Rob Green prepared his own design for two separate cottages, which were built in 1997-98 and 1999-2000. All three buildings were erected by local builder Ted Carruthers, a former employee of Max Mathews who had worked on the original house. By contrast, the buildings used mudbricks that were purchased pre-made, rather than handmade on site, which were laid as loadbearing structure rather than a non-structural infill. They also incorporated some recycled timber, such as the huge log poles of the sanctuary, which came from trees planted in the Otway Ranges by returned WW2 servicemen. During his phase, Rob Green also provided a small reception building/toilet block, which he conceived and built himself as a skillion-roofed timber farm shed.

The property remained owned by the Green family until 2014, serving both as their private residence and as their ongoing commercial reception /conference venue.

Description

Nanga Gnulle is a split-level timber and mudbrick house with corrugated galvanised steel roof. Rectilinear in plan, the house is stepped to follow the sloping site, with each level articulated by separate skillion roofs with clerestory windows, timber plank fascias and two huge chimneys of recycled brick. Timber structure, of weathered beams and posts, is exposed, with mudbrick infill and vertical timber cladding to upper level. Front and side elevations have large (some full-height) timber-framed windows and glazed doors with brick sills, and smaller square windows inset with thick panes of tinted glass. A pair of tall panelled timber doors (ex-ANA Hall) marks the main entry, opening to a full-width verandah with brick paving, thick timber posts and cement-sheeted soffits. At the southeast end is a flat-roofed carport, with timber-framed balcony above. The rugged aesthetic of the exterior, with its rough natural finishes, is echoed inside the house, which is similarly characterised by exposed timber, bagged mudbrick and reclaimed brickwork.

The landscaped setting includes the two linked ponds (one with a timber bridge, which Rob Green rebuilt c.2012), a fountain, a series of stone retaining walls (built using stone quarried from the site), pathways with stone steps and pole-framed pergolas, and various native and exotic plantings. There are five outbuildings: a rear shed, built (c.1972) of salvaged bricks with an arched entry and gabled roof of corrugated steel, the two virtually identical gabled mudbrick cottages, with exposed window lintels and door frames of rough timber, the octagonal-planned sanctuary/chapel (c.1993), of mudbrick construction with thick log poles and a dome-like roof with carved finial and, between the sanctuary and the house, near the carpark, the former toilet and reception block, which is a simple skillion-roofed shed-like structure clad in vertical timber boards.

Comparative Analysis

Bendigo has a tradition of mudbrick construction that dates back to the adobe miner's cottages erected in the nineteenth century, often by migrants of Germanic origin and typified by such examples at the former Maess House in Dooley Street, North Bendigo (c.1870s; demolished). The initial resurgence of post-war interest in mud brick, largely spurred by Alistair Knox and his circle, is represented in the broader Bendigo region by *Sunningdale*, a mudbrick homestead that Knox designed for the Nicholls family at Murphy's Creek, near Tarnagulla, in 1948. Latterly occupied by the Heather family, the homestead still stands at 1093 Dunolly-Rheola Road, just outside the present-day boundaries of the City of Greater Bendigo.

Dating from 1972-73, *Nanga Gnulle* was Knox's first project in what is now the City of Greater Bendigo. The designer is known to have undertaken two further commissions therein: the Leversha House at 23 Melaleuca Avenue, Junortoun (1978) and the Turnbull House at 2134 Bendigo-Pyramid Road, Raywood (1985). Of these, only the former was built. Still standing, it is a modest homestead-like dwelling with hipped roof and posted verandah, far simpler in form, design and detailing than *Nanga Gnulle*. Considered more broadly across Knox's oeuvre, *Nanga Gnulle* is a representative example of the type of domestic work he was doing in during his 1970s heyday. Its intactness, and volume of integrated salvage, are both notable.

From the late 1970s, mudbrick became increasingly popular in Bendigo. Numerous examples were erected by members of the Bendigo Home Builders' Club, a co-operative venture founded c.1980. These were typically self-designed (ie, without architect input) as well as self-built, with club members assisting each other on a labour-exchange basis. Some were basic cottages of traditional form, such as the Shearer House at 354 Bennetts Road, Junortoun (c.1981) and the Hovel House at 129 Hunts Gap Road, Mandurang South (1983-84). Others, clearly influenced by the Knox aesthetic, made use of unusual rooflines, clerestories and salvaged components, such as Butler House at 99 Dysons Road, Mandurang (c.1980), the Floyd House at 2 Ningara Drive (c.1981) and the Main House at 428 Somerset Park Road, Strathfieldsaye (c.1982). Another significant local manifestation was the mudbrick display house built in 1982 by the Housing Commission of Victoria to show how the construction system might be applied to public housing. While a photograph of this house was published, research to date has failed to confirm its address and thus its current status.

Mudbrick has remained popular in Bendigo, and especially in semi-rural areas on the city's fringe. More recent examples include one published in *Owner Builder* journal in Oct/Nov 1993, built by a retired couple named only as 'June and Norman' (as their surname was not cited, the house cannot easily be traced). Another, still standing at 40 Indigofera Road, Marong, was designed and built by artists Ray Pearce and Deidre Outhred over a sixteen year period from 1994, incorporating much salvaged material. A cursory review of recent real estate listings reveals many other mudbrick houses of presumed recent vintage, such as 92 Melaleuca Road, Junortoun; 25 Calena Road, Junortoun; 44 Inglis Road, Huntly; 68 Monsants Road, Maiden Gully; 64 Native Gully Crescent, Eppalock.

Statement of Significance

What is significant?

Built in 1973-74 to a design by Alistair Knox, *Nanga Gnulle* at 40 Harley Street, Strathdale, is a split-level timber and mudbrick house incorporating skillion roofs clad in corrugated steel, clerestory windows and reclaimed brick chimneys. The house was designed to incorporate a vast amount of material that owners Rob & Peg Green salvaged from demolished structures around Bendigo, including (but not limited to) huge timber members from a railway bridge, handmade bricks and items from the ANA Hall.

The significant fabric is defined as the exterior of the entire house (including verandah, carport and brick paving), with a nominal curtilage (minimum five metres to all sides) to preserve its immediate setting. The mudbrick outbuildings, of relatively recent date and far more conventional in their expression, are not considered to be significant. Although of some interest, the brick shed and landscaping (with which Alistair Knox had no involvement) are similarly not considered to be crucial to an understanding of the cultural significance of the house.

How is it significant?

Nanga Gnulle satisfies the following criteria for inclusion on the heritage overlay schedule to the City of Greater Bendigo planning scheme:

- Criterion C: Potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of our cultural or natural history.
- Criterion E: Importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics
- Criterion H: Special association with the life or works of a person of importance in our history

Why is it significant?

Nanga Gnulle is significant for the following reasons:

The house is significant for the carefully considered integration of recycled building materials that were salvaged from numerous important (or merely representative) nineteenth century structures in and around Bendigo that were demolished in the early 1970s. These materials, which would otherwise have been lost, collectively form part of the story of the Bendigo region, and their rare retention within this building has the potential to yield information to contribute to an understanding of the region's rich history. (*Criterion C*).

This house is significant as a notable example of the highly distinctive aesthetic style associated with the self-building subculture that became hugely popular in Victoria during the 1970s (continuing into the 1980s and beyond). Characterised by the extensive use of building materials that were either made from scratch (eg mudbricks) or salvaged from demolition sites (eg, reclaimed bricks, stone, weathered timber and architectural antiques), and by a preference for open planning, split levels and often unusual plan or roof forms, these houses are noted for their ruggedness and organic style. Although such houses became widely popular in Bendigo from the early 1980s, *Nanga Gnulle* stands out as a significantly earlier manifestation that must be seen as an important progenitor of a local trend that still continues to this day (*Criterion E*).

The house is significant as an excellent and notably intact example of the work of Alistair Knox, an important and influential figure in the development of post-war residential architecture in Victoria (and beyond), specifically for his role in promoting mudbrick construction, self-building and the integration of architectural salvage, all of which became widely popular in the 1970s. One of only three houses that Knox designed in what is now the City of Greater Bendigo, *Nanga Gnulle* is one of only two that were built, and stands out as the earliest, largest and best example of this work in the municipality (*Criterion H*).

While the property has associations with its use for wedding receptions, this is not deemed to equate with social significance at the local level, as such associations are typical of any local wedding reception venue.

References

Alistair Knox & Associates, 'Green House, Lot 11, Harley Street, Bendigo'. Working drawings, March 1973 (copies held by City of Greater Bendigo and Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

Interviews with Mr Robin Green, 22 February 2017 and Mr Robert Marshall, 24 February 2017.

Owner Builder, No 6 (Dec 1982), pp 6-8; No 20 (Aug/Nov 1986), pp 42-44; No 40 (Aug/Sep 1990), pp 5-9.

Originally identified by

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