

Heritage Citation



Vailima Flats

Key details

Addresses	At 8 Union Street, Spring Hill, Queensland 4000
Type of place	House
Period	Interwar 1919-1939
Style	Old English
Lot plan	L10_SP111231
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2004 Date of Citation — June 2015
Construction	Roof: Corrugated iron; Walls: Timber

People/associations	John Joseph Ahern (Architect); W.H. Morse (Builder)
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Criterion for listing	(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (D) Representative
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Vailima Flats were built in 1934 for retired grazier Joseph Lock. The purpose-built block of flats was constructed at the height of Brisbane's flat-building boom in interwar Old English style. The building was designed by young Brisbane architect John Ahern.

History

Although the site on the corner of Leichhardt Street (now St Pauls Terrace) and Union Street was first sold in 1858, it does not appear to have been developed in the nineteenth century. A house called 'Torquay Cottage' which may have stood on the site in the 1870s was gone by 1917, when the 'unimproved' block was offered for sale. Surprisingly for popular Spring Hill, it was not until June 1934 that the site was sold. The purchaser was retired grazier Joseph Lock, who sold his property 'Alice Downs' in 1933 and moved to Brisbane with his wife Catherine. On 20 June 1934, Lock submitted an application to the Brisbane City Council for the construction of a block of flats on St Pauls Terrace and Union Street.

Spring Hill in the 1930s was one of Brisbane's 'flat colonies', although its flat development was more limited than some other areas like New Farm. Spring Hill was densely populated from the late nineteenth century, with house conversions and boarding houses providing accommodation from the 1910s. However, the close-packed high density dwellings, narrow streets and small allotments gave the area a reputation as somewhat of a 'slum' suburb. Purpose-built flats, introduced to Spring Hill in the early 1920s, were initially considered to degrade the suburb further. This type of high density dwelling had been slow to arrive in Australia and in Brisbane, and acceptance of flat dwelling was even slower. Flats were seen as unhealthy and detrimental to families who resided in them.

By the 1930s the moral objections to flat dwelling had mostly been outweighed by demand. Well planned, purpose-built flats were increasingly seen as positive developments where they replaced older, dilapidated and neglected dwellings. Even detractors of flat-dwelling considered purpose-built flats an improvement in Spring Hill, a suburb 'on which', as the *Courier Mail* phrased it, 'the winter of decrepitude has long descended'. By 1938 the large number of flats built in the area had led the *Courier Mail* to suggest that Spring Hill would soon become the 'Darlinghurst of Brisbane,' while a Brisbane correspondent in the *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser* grudgingly acknowledged the value of the buildings:

By all accounts the craze for flat life is to be condemned, but it has done one good thing for Brisbane – it has altered the face of Spring Hill, which has become almost severely respectable. Corners where a few years ago "pushes" congregated as of divine right are now the site of blocks of flats numbered by the dozen, and the "bad men" have in their turn been pushed further back into the few mean streets still left.¹

Lock's site had many advantages, particularly for a flat building. The land comprised 27.3 perches and it was a

prime investment site as it was located close to the city and was across the road from the tram stop outside St Pauls Cathedral. It was situated on the ridgeline of one of Spring Hill's main thoroughfares, capturing breezes. It was close to services, including the tramline, church and Spring Hill's central commercial precinct between Fortescue and Rogers Streets. The corner position was also ideal for flats, as it allowed light and air to reach all or most rooms (as well as providing the service of discouraging "bad men" from loitering.)

Newly qualified architect John Joseph Ahern successfully tendered for the design of Lock's flats. Ahern had qualified as an architect in 1933 and was employed with Addison and Macdonald. His career in Brisbane, though short, included designs for flats, residences and work residences in Old English style. He went on to design 'Welsby Court' in New Farm, also with Addison and McDonald (1937). In 1939 he married and left Brisbane for Europe.

The flat building Ahern designed for Lock consisted of three large apartments in a mock Tudor style. The Old English style was very popular during the interwar period, having been renewed in Britain in the late nineteenth century. *The Sunday Mail* featured a number of Brisbane's Tudor homes during the 1930s, emphasising the style's 'unobtrusive dignity', which was 'full of romance and poetic charm' and which presented an alternative for those who objected to Brisbane's vernacular architecture. When used in flat buildings, it was argued to also help to reconcile the 'demoralising' effect of flats with a traditional home design.

Although the Old English or Mock Tudor style retained traditional features like half timbering, new designs adapted to contemporary requirements. In the case of these flats, the incorporation of the new wonder building material, fibre cement sheeting, provided sound proofing. Lock's flats were also built entirely in timber rather than using brick as in traditional Old English homes.

Builder W.H. Morse of Waverley Road, Taringa constructed the flats during 1934-35, the height of Brisbane's flat construction boom. The cost of construction was £1,390. Lock had financed the construction of the flats through a mortgage which he had acquired in August 1934.

The flats were ready for occupancy by August 1935, with Joseph Lock the first resident. They were managed by Catherine Lock, Joseph's wife, until her death in 1938. Such a role was not unusual, as women had long filled similar positions in boarding houses, guest residences and flat conversions. The Locks named the building 'Vailima Flats', perhaps reflecting their literary taste. Vailima was the name of the house built for British author Robert Louis Stevenson in Samoa in the nineteenth century.

By 1937, Colin Barden and Eric Patherick had leased the other two apartments that comprised Vailima Flats. The three men remained the residents of Vailima Flats until the outbreak of the Second World War. Barden and Patherick had left by 1940, perhaps for war work, and only Lock was left at Vailima Flats.

Lock sold the flats to James and Vera Fitzgerald in October 1947. Kathleen Dean bought the property from the Fitzgeralds in February 1953. She was the proprietor of Vailima for the next seventeen years. The site was reduced slightly in 1957, when the Brisbane City Council resumed 4.1 perches of land to realign St Pauls Terrace. Vailima Flats was sold twice more in the twentieth century before passing to its current owners in November 1988.

In 1993, Vailima Flats was included in the Spring Hill Heritage Tour by the Brisbane History Group.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history

as evidence of the pattern of residential development in Spring Hill during the interwar period; and, as an inner-city, multi-storey flat building constructed during Brisbane's inner city flat building boom of the 1930s.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage

as a rare surviving example of an Old English interwar purpose-built block of flats.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places

as purpose-built flats in the Old English style featuring external timber decorative patterning on a symmetrical timber structure.

References

1. *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 1 April 1938 p2
2. Bennett, Helen, *Interpreting the Modern: flatland in Brisbane 1920-1941*, PhD thesis, Griffith University, 2011
3. Brisbane City Council aerial photographs, 1946, 2012
4. Brisbane City Council, Brisbane City Archives, Building Register 1934

5. Brisbane City Council City Architecture and Heritage Team, citations
 6. Brisbane City Council, Properties on the Web, Building Cards
 7. Brisbane City Council Water Supply and Sewerage Detail Plans
 8. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of Title and other records
 9. McKellar's Map of Brisbane and Suburbs. Brisbane: Surveyor-General's Office, 1895
 10. Fisher, Rod, *Spring Hill Heritage Tour: St Pauls to Gregory Terrace*, Kelvin Grove: Brisbane History Group, 1993
 11. National Library of Australia, Trove website newspapers, *Brisbane Courier*, *Courier Mail*, *The Queenslander*, *The Telegraph*, *Maryborough Chronicle*, *Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*
 12. Queensland Post Office Directories
 13. Watson, Donald and Judith McKay. *A Directory of Queensland Architects to 1940*. (St. Lucia: U of Q Press, 1984)
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Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

Citation prepared by — Brisbane City Council (page revised June 2022)



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