

Heritage Advice for the Victoria Planning Authority, 'Myer House', Minta Farm, Berwick (Stage 1)



Figure 1: Myer House (27 March 2017)

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Prepared for: Victorian Planning Authority

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1. Introduction

Minta Farm is a site of some 288.9 hectares located in the suburb of Berwick on Melbourne's urban fringe. A 'Historic Cultural Heritage Assessment' of the entire farm was undertaken by Tardis Enterprises 'Archaeologists and Heritage Advisors' in 2011 (the Tardis Report). The Assessment identified a series of structures on the site, including the 'Minta Homestead', a small dairy, workers quarters, a cottage and a 'Myer House'. The assessment identified the Myer House as having 'moderate historic cultural heritage significance' and suggested a series of management options, but did not explicitly recommend a Heritage Overlay for the site.

We have been engaged to provide additional advice on the significance of the Myer House, as per the following tasks. The tasks have been broken into stages as agreed.

Stage 1

- Undertake a peer review of the 'Historic Cultural Heritage Assessment'
- Desktop research into the history of the Myer House
- Preparation of a contextual history of the Myer House

Stage 2

- Preparation of heritage assessment of the Myer House
- Collation and Indexation of the photographic record

Stage 3 (if required)

- Preparation of a heritage citation for the Myer House
- Preparation of a report making recommendations in relation to integration, conservation and management within the Precinct Structure Plan (PSP)

This Report contains all deliverables required in Stage 1. It is informed by an external and internal inspection of the building, which was undertaken on 27 March 2017. Images in this report were taken by GJM Heritage on that date, unless otherwise stated.

2. Planning Controls

Minta Farm is located within the Urban Growth Boundary. The entire property is subject to the Growth Area Infrastructure Contribution. Parts of the broader Minta Farm complex are also identified as being within an area of Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Sensitivity. The Minta Farm Complex and 'outbuildings' are identified in the Casey Heritage Study (2004), although the site is not included on the Heritage Overlay. The Myer House has not been specifically identified as a building of heritage significance in any previous heritage study – excepting the limited reference within the Tardis Report of 2011.

3. The Place

3.1 Location

Minta Farm comprises approximately 288.9 hectares of land – broadly bounded by Soldiers Road (to the west), the Princes Freeway (to the north) a series of lakes (to the east) and Grices Road (to the south). The site is located on Melbourne's urban fringe and the entire site is currently going through a PSP process with a view to it being re-zoned as residential land and subdivided.

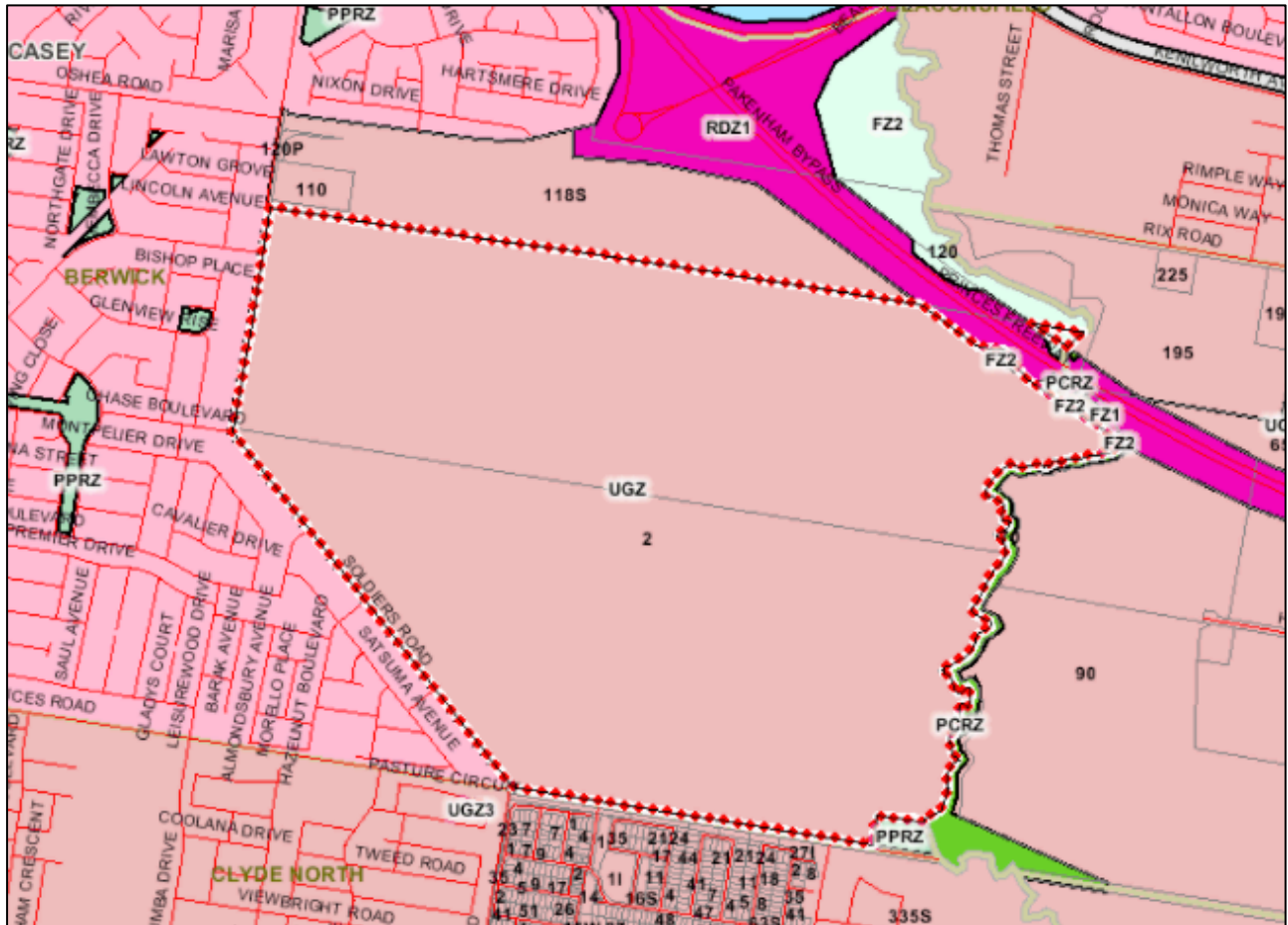


Figure 2: Planning Maps Online showing the subject site (accessed 28 March 2017)

4. The Tardis Report

4.1 Assessment Summary

4.1.1 The History of the Myer House

The assessment of the Minta Farm Complex was undertaken by Tardis in 2011. While containing a detailed assessment of the Minta Homestead and other outbuildings, it includes more limited information in relation to the Myer House. The Report makes the following observations in relation to the history of the Myer House:

A phase of later additions to the property, potentially coinciding with the first addition of a second storey to the homestead (based on the gable vents) includes workers quarters and another small dwelling.... Also, a more recent stucco/cement render 'Myer House' (1940/50s) has been added at the southwestern extent of the farm building complex... These structures have been added since the Baillieu family acquired the activity area (post-1931).

In particular, Myer Houses (also labeled 'lifetime homes') were created as a response to a housing shortage following WWII. In 1945, Norman Myer, of the famous Myer retail store family, first introduced the prefabricated steel homes to 60 Melbourne businessmen and politicians on Friday 7 September, 1945 at the Ansett Airways factory, Essendon as an answer to 'the housing problem' (The Argus 8 September 1945: 9 & 16 January 1947: 12).

The houses were available "in six designs, each capable of carrying an additional room if required. All the normal fittings are built-in, and the home, because of its design, will require much less furnishings and furniture than normal". Their design, while in an American Colonial style, consisted

of an entrance hall, lounge, dining room, two bedrooms (with built-in cupboards & bunks in the second bedroom), kitchen (streamlined & cherry red & white), bathroom, and laundry (with hot-water service) and wall to wall carpeting in green. The Myer House used only one-third of the normal manpower, timber, and cement in its construction, and was one-third lighter to allow for transportation (The Argus 16 January 1947: 12 & The Argus 13 February 1947: 13).

The Myer Homes went into commercial production off an assembly line at Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation's works at Fishermen's Bend on Wednesday 17 January, 1947 under the supervision of Wing-commander LJ Wackett. "JC Taylor and Sons P/L, who had built many of the city's main buildings, would erect the houses" at a cost of around £1,500 fully furnished, including delivery. It was claimed that the houses were "capable of erection and occupancy within 15 days of leaving the line" (The Argus 16 January 1947: 12).¹

The Argus reported that Norman Myer claimed the homes were:

The cheapest home of its type ever built. Minimum use had been made of materials which would deteriorate. There was no exposed woodwork, and very little wood was used in the interior. The house had an all-cement foundation, an iron frame, thick cement and plaster walls, and zinc anneal tiles, which would neither move nor break. (The Argus 16 January 1947: 12).

The Tardis Report goes on to note that:

The first Myer House was constructed in Treasury Gardens, Melbourne and was open for public inspection, for which tickets were required, on Wednesday 12 February, 1947 by then Victorian Premier Mr Cain. A large crowd attended the opening (The Argus 13 February 1947: 13).

4.1.2 The Significance of the Myer House

In commenting on the significance of the Myer House, the Tardis Report notes:

This survey resulted in the identification of several structures ... and associated floral plantings of various ages within the activity area. However, when these structures and plantings were subject to historic cultural heritage assessment criteria, all but one was assessed as being of low historic cultural heritage significance. The structures included the property 'Minta' homestead, a small dairy, workers quarters, a 'Myer House' and a cottage. The homestead was first referred to in 1913 on a record of sales and is presumed to have been established around this time. Since then the homestead has been significantly altered and added to until recently, which has resulted in its low significance assessment.

The additional structure that was assessed as having moderate historic cultural heritage significance is a 'Myer House'. This house is in excellent condition and its style/structure was created in a Government response for affordable housing due to housing shortages following WWII. Additionally, the structure and design of the Myer House is highly influenced by Norman Myer of Myer retail stores, as he was the instigator of the development of these homes which were known as 'Myer Houses'.²

On the basis of the above, the Report concludes that: ... *the Myer House should be considered for retention if possible.*³

¹ Tardis Report, p.38.

² Tardis Report, p.v.

³ Tardis Report, p. vi.

5. Peer Review of Tardis Report

5.1 Myer House Assessment

The history of the development of the Myer House type contained within the Tardis Report is accurate. However, as the Tardis Report was broad in its scope, it has provided limited discussion of the historic economic and social context for the development of the 'Myer House' type, about how long the houses were produced for, or about how many might survive. Some broader contextual history is provided below.

5.1.1 The History of the Myer House

The advent of the Great Depression in 1930 saw a dramatic decline in building activity in Victoria. In his history of the Peter Lalor House Building Co-Operative Society, Gary Johns notes that while 'the pre-depression building operations were valued at £2.6 million a year and by 1931-32 the figure was a mere £383,000.⁴:

The advent of the Great Depression had a dramatic impact upon housing growth in Victoria: The reduction in building activity created a shortage of houses, but it also reduced opportunities for apprentices, creating a longer term skills shortage. The advent of World War II diverted resources away from residential development in Victoria and, indeed it virtually ground to a halt. The migration of large numbers of soldiers overseas reduced demand whilst the war lasted. However, as the soldiers returned the true extent of the housing shortage became apparent. The problem was compounded by a lack of qualified labour and a shortage of materials. As a result, between 1939 and 1947 the cost of building rose by 90%.⁵

There was significant interest – both from the public and private sector – in attempting to resolve the issue. The solutions identified were varied. They included the formation of housing co-operatives, for example the Peter Lalor Homebuilding Cooperative Society, which involved the subdivision of what is now the suburb of 'Lalor', as well as the development of a series of prototype homes that could be constructed quickly and cheaply. Two of the earliest housing types developed were the Beaufort and Myer Houses.

The Beaufort House was designed in 1946 by the technical staff of the Beaufort Division of the Department of Aircraft production, and was developed through the Victorian Housing Commission. The project was financed by the Commonwealth Government through the Department of Works and Housing.

A brochure issued at the time noted that:

The Beaufort Home is the culmination of intensive research in design, durability, insulation and equipment by the Beaufort Division of the Department of Aircraft production in association with the Victorian State Housing Commission and the Commonwealth Department of Works and Housing through the Experimental Building Station.

The house is essentially of steel construction, comprising floor members, walls, roof structure and sheeting, and is mounted on concrete foundation stumps. Wooden flooring is used except in the bathroom, which is covered with a special waterproof slab.

Wood is also used for doors and built in wardrobes and cupboards.

Plaster ceilings are used and wall linings are of the same material, except the bathroom and laundry, where Masonite has been chosen.⁶

⁴ Gary Johns, *Building a Suburb: the Peter Lalor Home Building Co-Operative Society* (Melbourne: Melbourne State College, 1978), p.2.

⁵ Context, *Peter Lalor Housing Estate: Heritage Significance Assessment*, June 2012, p.13.

⁶ Beaufort Division, Department of Aircraft Production, *Beaufort Homes* [(Melbourne) June 1946), quoted in Timothy Hubbard Pty Ltd, *City of Coburg Heritage and Conservation Streetscape Study*, 1990, p.32.

The Myer House was a similar initiative by Norman Myer (of the Myer Stores family) who introduced it to a group of 60 Melbourne businessmen and politicians on 7 September 1945. The plan was to develop a house that was capable of quick erection at low cost and would require only limited maintenance. The 'Myer House' was to cost approximately £1500 and would be capable of erection within 15 days. The benefits of the house were detailed in an article published in the Argus on 16 January 1947, where Norman Myer was reported as stating:

It is the cheapest home of its type ever built. The minimum use has been made of materials which would deteriorate. There was no exposed woodwork and very little wood was used in the interior. The house had an all-cement foundation, an iron frame, thick cement and plaster walls, and zinc anneal tiles, which would neither move nor break.⁷

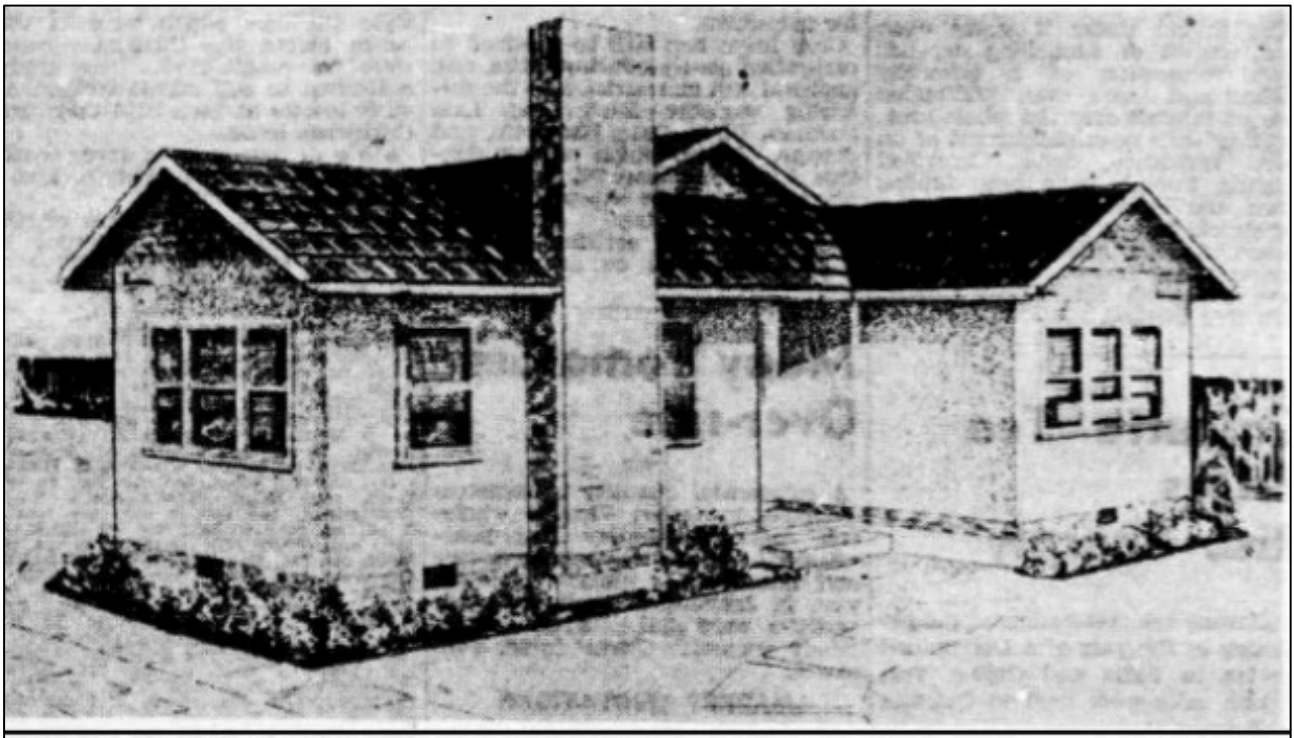


Figure 3: Illustration of one of a 'Myer House', The Argus, 16 January 1947

The Argus went on to report that:

The house is to be built in six designs, each capable of carrying an additional room if required. All the normal fittings are in-built, and the home, because of its design, will require much less furnishings and furniture than is normal.⁸

The Myer House was to be constructed by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Pty Ltd under the supervision of Wing-Commander L.J. Wackett.⁹ There was considerable government and public interest in the project, with a demonstration Myer Home (that was to be raffled) erected in Treasury Gardens in January 1947 and reports of long queues of people waiting to order the house.

Last night upwards of a hundred people stood, snored or dosed in Collins Street west, so that they would be sure of a chance of purchasing a 'Myer house' when the doors of Electra House, open at nine o'clock this morning. Because many more hundreds are expected to join the queue before 'zero hour', employees of the building will be compelled to enter the building by the back door'. The first

⁷ The Argus, 16 January, 1947, p.12.

⁸ The Argus, 16 January 1947, p.12.

⁹ The Age, 12 February 1947, p.5

25 in the queue will, providing they have land in the right district, have a home erected complete with water, lighting and sinks, within 17 days... Six hundred houses, which are five roomed and complete with all accessories, will be erected this year under the scheme. At least 1000 will be erected next year.¹⁰



Figure 4: Myer House in Treasury Gardens, 24 January 2017

Despite the apparent enthusiasm for the 'Myer House' model it declined quickly. Even prior to the launch of the Myer House, State Cabinet had already determined to favour the 'Beaufort Model'.

A report from 11 February 1947 notes that, 'State Cabinet yesterday decided in favour of the Beaufort steel home as the type of prefabricated house with which Victoria's housing problem could be best solved.' The report noted that the plan was subject to the Commonwealth Government's approval, but that if that was obtained 'an order of 5,000 homes would be placed almost immediately'.¹¹ The critical factor in the State Cabinet's decision appears to have been the relative cost. The Beaufort house was reported to cost £1,050 plus £150 site cost, whereas the total price of the Myer House was reported as £1,650 (presumably £1500 plus the £150 site cost).

Other doubts appear to have emerged about the suitability of the 'Myer model'. A report in the 'Argus' from 3 April 1947 notes that 'Dr Doris Office' had criticized the house as being unsuitable for large families.¹² There were also concerns about the structural integrity of the building with the Builders and

¹⁰ The Age, 19 February 1947, p.8.

¹¹ The Argus, 11 February 1947

¹² The Argus, 3 April 1947, p.20.

Allied Trades Association, in relation to Council approval of the erection of a Myer House in Glen Waverley, raising a number of issues – including that the foundations are laid on the ground, that the height of the kitchen walls and ‘conveniences’ was inadequate, that the wall studs were inadequate.¹³

Despite the reservations, construction of Myer Houses proceeded, although in far smaller numbers than had been anticipated. In addition to the approval of the Glen Waverley house mentioned above, there are also reports of houses being constructed in Newport (Hobson Street), and at 659 Moreland Road, Pascoe Vale South. Two Myer houses were also erected in 1948 in the grounds of Eynesbury Homestead. Other examples were reportedly constructed in Trafalgar, Mount Eliza, Sunshine and Pascoe Vale.¹⁴

A change of Government in Victoria on 8 November 1947 along with concerns about the economic viability of both the Beaufort and Myer Houses led to their demise. By December 1947 (within a month of their election), the Hollway Liberal - Country Coalition Government had recommended to the Commonwealth that the Beaufort Homes’ contract be scrapped. The State Minister for Housing (Mr. Warner) also noted that ‘the steel supplies for the Myer prefabricated home built by the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation would also be curtailed, and probably cancelled’. The Minister for Housing went on to claim that ‘eight ordinary type dwellings could be built for every Myer House erected.’¹⁵

The Commonwealth acceded to the State’s request to cancel the Beaufort homes project to save steel and to ‘curtail’ the construction of the Myer house ‘until the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation’ could reduce the large quantity of light-gauge metal used.¹⁶ Subsequent reports noted that ‘Myer prefabricated steel homes might be produced again if satisfactory substitutes for light-gauge steel were devised’.¹⁷ However, there does not seem to have been an uptake in production. By 1949 other alternatives were available – including the homes designed by a variety of architects as part of the ‘Small Homes Service’. Neither the Beaufort or Myer homes appear to have been manufactured in significant numbers after this time.

There is uncertainty about the total number of Myer Houses erected in the State, but a newspaper article from 6 August 1947 notes that a Glen Waverley House will be the ‘35th’ Myer House to be erected.¹⁸

5.1.2 The Minta Myer House - History

There is limited information available about the installation of the Myer House on Minta Farm. However, as the houses were only manufactured for a short period of time, it can be assumed that the house was manufactured in c1947 and subsequently transferred to the site. Rate records are not conclusive, but a hand annotation to the entry for Minta Farm in 1958 notes that there are ‘5 houses’ on the farm. An aerial image of the site from January 1960 clearly shows the Myer House – in its current location – on site.

¹³ The Dandenong Journal, 6 August 1947, p.11.

¹⁴ Personal Correspondence – Martin Zweep, Heritage Victoria 29 March 2017.

¹⁵ The West Australian, 13 December 1947, p.8.

¹⁶ The Argus, 12 February 1948, p.1.

¹⁷ The Argus, 25 March 1948, p.3

¹⁸ The Dandenong Journal, 6 August 1947, p.11.

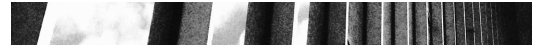


Figure 5: January 1960, Aerial image – arrow indicates Myer House



Figure 6: February 1971, Aerial Image – arrow indicates Myer House

There is no record of why the house was erected, but it seems likely that it was intended to provide accommodation for either extended family or agricultural workers. Fleur Philip (the owner's daughter who grew up on the site) indicated that it was occupied by a mechanic and his wife for an extended period of time. The land though remained in the ownership of Minta Farm.

The house remains highly intact externally. Some internal changes have been made – including the removal of a wall separating the kitchen and dining areas and the replacement of the kitchen.

6. Conclusion

The Myer House is a highly intact example of a prefabricated dwelling designed in response to the housing crisis in the immediate post-war period. In Stage 2, we will prepare an assessment of the house against the heritage criteria contained within the *Planning Practice Note 1: Applying the Heritage Overlay* (July 2015). The assessment will also involve a comparative analysis of the Myer House against other known examples within Victoria.

References:

- Beaufort Division, Department of Aircraft Production, Beaufort Homes, Melbourne, June 1946.
- Context, *Peter Lalor Housing Estate: Heritage Significance Assessment*, June 2012.
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- The West Australian, 13 December 1947.