

PROPOSED LOCAL HERITAGE PLACE

Adobe House, 8 Madsen Street, Keperra (LOT PLAN: 422_RP78864)



SUMMARY

Built by 1957, the Adobe House in Keperra was constructed by the Queensland Housing Commission using non-traditional construction methods, namely adobe blocks. As the only house constructed by the Queensland Housing Commission using this method, the Adobe House illustrates how the Commission sought to alleviate Brisbane's post-Second World War housing shortage by exploring a range of construction methods.

HISTORY

A history of Keperra

Keperra, a suburb located nine kilometres northwest of central Brisbane, is located on the southern bank of Kedron Brook, and was formerly considered part of the suburb of Grovely – often spelt Groveley.¹ However, the growth of Keperra after the Second World War saw the area overtake Grovely in importance. As a result, Grovely is now a neighbourhood of Keperra.

Grovely was initially settled by farming families and brickmakers in the 1860s. The area was named after Grovely Lodge, a farm owned by John Nicolson. The farm was named after Grovely in England. In 1869, St Matthews Anglican Church, initially named Grovely Church, was opened.² However, the area remained sparsely populated until well into the 20th Century. Although Grovely and Keperra were considered to have good farmland, the distance from the city and a lack of transport deterred settlement.

The Grovely railway station, which opened in 1918, increased nearby development but sites removed from the station remained unpopulated. The population of Grovely was just 133 in 1921. In 1932, a railway station called Keperra was opened by the Enoggera golf links, now Keperra Golf Club.³

Grovely and Keperra became home to a large military garrison during the Second World War. Grovely Army Camp became home to the 1st Australian Motor Transport Training Depot and a detention centre. The former was involved in the training of drivers for the Australian Army. The Grovely Military Detention Camp was the scene of several revolts against the conditions under which prisoners were held.⁴ For example, in March 1945, the detention centre was the site of an attempted revolt when prisoners sought to burn down the barracks.⁵ During the revolt, four prisoners escaped but were subsequently recaptured.⁶

After the Second World War, the land occupied by the military was handed over to the newly established Queensland Housing Commission. From 1948 onwards, the Queensland Housing Commission began developing a substantial housing estate in Grovely.⁷ Like many others constructed by the Queensland Housing Commission, this estate exemplified the Commission's role 'in the [suburban] spread of [Brisbane] in the immediate post-war period.'⁸ As the area continued to develop in the 1960s and 1970s, Keperra became the more prominent area and became a suburb in August 1975. At the same time, Grovely was granted neighbourhood status as part of Keperra. By 1976, the population of Keperra, now including Grovely, was 6,628. Finally, while Keperra has grown to become a residential suburb, it is also home to the Keperra Bushland reserve.

¹ 'Groveley Is Way to Spell Name of Camp Suburb,' *The Courier-Mail*, 17 December 1940, p. 4.

² 'The Founding of Groveley Church,' *The Telegraph*, 13 August 1936, p. 11.

³ 'Golf,' *The Telegraph*, 25 November 1932, p. 6.

⁴ 'Bad Food, Bugs, Bashings Alleged,' *Truth*, 21 January 1945, p. 16.

⁵ 'S.U.S. in Revolt: Grovely Prison Barracks Fire,' *The Courier-Mail*, 26 March 1945, p. 3; 'Grovely Fire: Guards Shot,' *Tweed Daily*, 26 March 1945, p. 1.

⁶ 'Grovely Prisoners Recaptured,' *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 31 March 1945, p. 3.

⁷ 'Big Grovely House Plan,' *Brisbane Telegraph*, 9 December 1948, p. 1; 'Grovely Housing Plan,' *Worker*, 13 December 1948, p. 5.

⁸ Robyn Hollander, 'Housing under Labour: The Queensland Housing Commission, 1945-1957' (PhD Thesis, Griffith University, 1996), p. 1.

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The Queensland Housing Commission and Brisbane's housing shortage after the Second World War

Towards the end of the Second World War, it was widely recognised at all levels of government in Australia that a housing shortage existed. In Queensland, the problem was particularly acute, with the Queensland Bureau of Industry stating in 1945 that it 'estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 new dwellings' were required to meet the needs of the state.⁹ In Brisbane, housing became a vital issue during the Brisbane City Council election in 1946, with the Labour candidate for Lord Mayor, C.A. Edwards, proposing a new municipal housing scheme to solve Brisbane's housing shortage.¹⁰ By July 1946, it was reported that Brisbane had a shortfall of some 16,000 houses.¹¹ The problem of building new houses had two primary causes: labour supply and construction materials availability. Other contributing factors included a growing population influenced by migration after the Second World War.¹²

The challenge of providing and building housing as part of Australia's reconstruction efforts after the Second World War was a vital element of the Commonwealth Government's post-war priorities. In 1942, the report of the Commonwealth Government's Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security had recommended forming a federal body to help develop public housing. Then, in 1943, Ben Chifley, recently appointed as Minister for Post-War Reconstruction, set up the Commonwealth Housing Commission to explore Australia's housing problems. One outcome of the reports produced by the Commonwealth Housing Commission was the negotiation and signing of the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement in 1945. This agreement provided funds to states to construct new accommodation for rental purposes and was administered by the newly established Department of Works and Housing.

As well as efforts at the federal level, in December 1945, the Queensland Government established the State – later Queensland – Housing Commission. The Queensland Housing Commission was constituted under the terms of the *State Housing Act* of 1945 and was responsible for planning, constructing, acquiring, maintaining public housing, and granting loans for home ownership. The origins of the Queensland Housing Commission could be traced back to the *State Advances Act* of 1916 and the establishment of the State Advances Corporation, established to oversee the management of the *Workers Dwelling Act*.¹³ In turn, this dated back to 1909 and the passing of the *Workers Dwelling Act* and the creation of the Workers Dwelling Board. Importantly, Queensland Housing Commission acted as the 'authority for Queensland in respect of the joint Commonwealth and State Housing Agreement.'¹⁴

The Adobe House at 8 Madsen Street

In late 1950, the Queensland Housing Commission advertised tenders for 'two experimental earthen homes – one adobe block and other pise de terre construction.'¹⁵ These houses were to be constructed on the Queensland Housing Commission estate at Grovely – later known as Keperra.

⁹ Robyn Hollander, 'Contracting: The Queensland Housing Commission Experience, 1945-1957,' *Australian Economic History Review*, 37, no. 2 (1997), p. 120.

¹⁰ 'Housing Plan Biggest Issue of City Election,' *The Courier-Mail*, 18 April 1946, p. 5.

¹¹ 'Housing Lag of 16,000 In Brisbane,' *Sunday Mail*, 14 July 1946, p. 5.

¹² State Library of Queensland, Queensland Housing Commission, *The Report of the Commissioner for the Year Ended 30th June 1950*, pp. 7-8.

¹³ *The Queensland Year Book 1945*, no. 6 (Brisbane, QLD: 1946), p. 340.

¹⁴ *The Queensland Year Book 1950*, no. 11 (Brisbane, QLD, 1950) p. 375.

¹⁵ 'Advertising,' *Brisbane Telegraph*, 30 September 1950, p. 30; 'Advertising,' *The Courier-Mail*, 30 September 1950, p. 11; 'Experimental Earthen Homes,' *Queensland Times*, 3 October 1950, p. 1; 'Homes from mud,' *The Courier-Mail*, 3 October 1950, p. 3.



Three thousand pounds was set aside for the project.¹⁶ The house at 8 Madsen Street is the only one of the experimental houses completed and was constructed of adobe block. Unfortunately, the house to be constructed using *pise de terre* methods was cancelled due to cost overruns. This house was to be constructed at 6 Madsen Street.

By 1950, Queensland Housing Commission began showing interest in various construction methods for building houses to help alleviate the housing shortage. For example, in 1950, the Queensland Housing Commission began importing prefabricated houses from various European sources. Similarly, in April 1950, the Commission sought tenders from abroad for the 'supply and erection of 1000 concrete houses.'¹⁷ The shift towards alternative means of construction, such as the use of concrete, was an interesting development given that traditionally, low-cost housing in Queensland had typically been constructed of 'timber and tin.' For example, while the War Service Homes Commission had built several brick houses in Queensland after the First World War, they had quickly reverted to 'timber and tin' construction methods, as they recognised that brick houses were 'too expensive, and less suitable to the Queensland climate than wooden houses.'¹⁸ However, by 1950, Queensland Housing Commission believed there was no good reason not to build concrete houses.¹⁹ This change in the perception of concrete as a construction material was influenced by the 'post-war shortage of bricks and timber' and a view that housing construction could be quicker and cheaper due to the increased size of concrete blocks compared to bricks.²⁰

As well as concrete and prefabricated houses, the Queensland Housing Commission also examined the use of other construction methods. For example, in May 1950, the Queensland Government's Secretary for Public Works, Housing and Local Government, Paul Hilton MLA, announced a 'scheme to make fuller use of building resources for housing construction.'²¹ This scheme was explicitly aimed at the use of adobe and *pise-de-terre* methods. Hilton's announcement led to two crucial decisions. First, it was announced in June 1950 that the Queensland Housing Commission would build a series of experimental homes using these methods to explore whether they were economically viable. Second, the Queensland Housing Commission produced a how-to guide, *Homes of Earth*, designed to explain to the public how to build adobe and *pise-de-terre* housing.²²

The use of adobe blocks has a long history stretching back several thousand years. Originating in the Mediterranean, adobe blocks first came to Australia in the 1850s.²³ By the 1920s, the method was promoted in Queensland by the Department of Agriculture and the Town Planning Association.²⁴ They were promoted as the method was believed to be a highly economical form of construction due to the availability of raw materials. A Queensland Housing Commission *Homes of Earth* booklet noted adobe blocks were created by pouring 'soil, water, and straw [...] into moulds to form blocks which when thoroughly dry are laid like bricks.'²⁵ These bricks are typically around 30cm thick. This allowed for rooms to be well-insulated against the weather.²⁶

¹⁶ Hollander, 'Housing under Labour,' p. 216.

¹⁷ 'State to Build in Concrete: 1000 Houses Scheme,' *The Courier-Mail*, 25 April 1950, p. 1.

¹⁸ Brisbane Local Heritage Places online, *Brick War Service Home* (Brisbane City Council, 2010).

¹⁹ Alfons Vernooy, *The Dutch Houses of Coopers Plains: A Postwar Housing Debacle at Brisbane* (Kelvin Grove, QLD: Brisbane History Group, 2004), p. 17; Robyn Hollander, 'Modernism, Austerity and the Queensland Housing Commission, 1945-59,' *Journal of Australian Studies* 22, no. 57 (1998), p. 78.

²⁰ Brian Marsden, 'A Century of Building Materials in Queensland and Brisbane, 1861-1961,' *Australian Geographer* 10, no. 2 (1966), p. 122.

²¹ 'Mud Brick Houses for QLD now Suggested,' *Brisbane Telegraph*, 30 May 1950, p. 14.

²² Anon, *Homes of Earth: How to Build Homes of Pise De Terre or Adobe Blocks* (Brisbane, QLD: Queensland Housing Commission, 1950).

²³ Miles Lewis, 'Making Do' in Patrick Troy (ed.), *A History of European Housing in Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 50.

²⁴ Lewis, 'Making Do,' p. 50; 'Real Estate and Home Building,' *Truth*, 10 November 1929, p. 13.

²⁵ Anon, *Homes of Earth*, p. 2.

²⁶ Anon, *Homes of Earth*, p. 2.

While the Queensland Government were enthusiastic about the possibility of using adobe blocks and *pise-de-terre* for economic reasons much debate surrounded the use of these construction methods. For example, on 8 October 1950, just days after the tender notice for 8 Madsen Street was advertised, the *Sunday Mail* published an article questioning the economic validity of the construction method.²⁷ However, in 1951, *Queensland Country Life* noted the advantage of adobe blocks due to the prevailing shortage of materials then being experienced, though they did note that the technique was labour intensive.²⁸ Similarly, the President of the Queensland Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, R.W. Voller, criticised Queensland Government's policy of contracting out designs for prefabrication.²⁹ Instead, Voller argued that greater use of 'indigenous materials' through techniques such as adobe blocks should be used.³⁰

Despite much of the ongoing debate over the efficacy of adobe blocks, the house at 8 Madsen Street was constructed using day labour and was completed by 1957. The design of the house presents as a typical post-Second World War austerity-style home, with a sheeted hip-and-valley roof and a stepped frontage. However, as the house cost exceeded expected expenditure, this was the only house of its type built by the Queensland Housing Commission.³¹ A garage was added in 1965, and the house was extended at the rear in 1977. In 2022, an open carport was added at the front of the property.

²⁷ 'Adobe houses expert's job,' *Sunday Mail*, 8 October 1950, p. 4.

²⁸ 'Short of Timber?,' *Queensland Country Life*, 11 January 1951, p. 12.

²⁹ 'Buy own prefab says architect,' *The Courier-Mail*, 20 July 1951, p. 5.

³⁰ 'Buy own prefab says architect,' *The Courier-Mail*, 20 July 1951, p. 5.

³¹ Hollander, 'Housing under Labour,' p. 216.

DESCRIPTION

The Adobe House at 8 Madsen Street, Keperra is a rare example of an austerity style house constructed by the Queensland Housing Commission using adobe blocks. The house, set back from the road, faces southeast on its block, and is surrounded by a garden.

General description

The house is a lowset single storey house with a non-original extension (c. 1977) to the rear of the house. L-shaped in plan, the house has a hip-and-valley roof with projecting eaves. The house is constructed using adobe blocks, a method of construction in which soil, water, and straw are moulded into blocks that are then laid like bricks. The blocks are around 30cm in thick. The adobe blocks are set on an in-situ concrete foundation.

The street-facing elevation of 8 Madsen Street has a stepped asymmetrical form. The entrance to the house is adjacent to the southwestern projection at the front of the house. A security door provides entry to the porch, which is located under the eaves of the main roofline. A stairway leads up to the street facing entrance from the front garden. The windows, door locations, and glazing arrangements, are original. However, the joinery has been removed and replaced with modern aluminium framed windows. Roofing materials consists of galvanised sheet metal.

The house is set in a landscaped garden with a non-original concrete retaining wall. A driveway extends along the south eastern side of the building. The driveway provides an entrance to a non-original garage (c. 1965) located to the rear of the property. A non-original carport (c. 2022) is located at the front of the house and partially obscures the building.

Significant features

Features of cultural heritage significance include:

- Views to and from the house
- The original form, location, set back and orientation of the house
- Adobe block walls
- Hip-and-valley roof form, including eaves
- Front entry, porch and staircase
- Location, size, materials, and arrangement of original door and window openings
- Internal room layouts, where original

Non-significant features

Non-significant features include:

- Non-original rear extension to the house (c. 1977)
- Non-original garage (c. 1965)
- Non-original carport (c. 2022)
- Non-original retaining wall

CURTILAGE

The curtilage captures all significant or original elements of the place as described and consists of lot 422, RP78864



Source: Brisbane City Plan Online Mapping

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STATEMENTS OF SIGNIFICANCE

<p>Criterion A Historical</p> <p>The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history.</p>	<p>The Adobe House demonstrates the determination of the Queensland Housing Commission to explore the utilisation of non-traditional building materials in order to meet the severe housing shortages and lack of building materials following the Second World War.</p>
<p>Criterion B Rarity</p> <p>The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage.</p>	<p>The Adobe House is the only example of an adobe house built by the Queensland Housing Commission after the Second World War. Built as one of two proposed 'test houses' in the 1950s, the house is a rare example of an earth-construction house in Brisbane.</p>
<p>Criterion C Scientific</p> <p>The place has the potential to provide information that will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the city's or local area's history.</p>	<p>The Adobe House has the potential to yield important information about the Queensland Housing Commission's experimentation with non-traditional building materials; in particular the adobe method of construction.</p>
<p>Criterion D Representative</p> <p>The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>Criterion E Aesthetic</p> <p>The place is important because of its aesthetic significance</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>Criterion F Technical</p>	<p>The adobe construction of this house represents an innovative use of non-traditional building materials to construct a house that is similar in style to traditional houses in Brisbane, especially for a public housing scheme. In drawing from housing materials and construction</p>

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<p>The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technological achievement at a particular period.</p>	<p>methods more commonly used in South America, the house was considered to be responsive to climate and to have excellent insulation qualities.</p>
<p>Criterion G Social</p> <p>The place has a strong or special association with the life or work of a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.</p>	<p>N/A</p>
<p>Criterion H Historical Association</p> <p>The place has a special association with the life or work of a particular person, group or organisation of importance in the city's or local area's history</p>	<p>N/A</p>

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