



Port Phillip Heritage Review

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6.36 Armstrong Street Commercial Precinct (Middle Park) – Ho445

Existing Designations:

Heritage Council Register:	nil
National Estate Register:	nil
National Trust Register:	nil

Previous Heritage Studies:

Conservation Study 1975:	Precinct 20
Conservation Study 1987:	UC1: Precinct F (part)
Heritage Review 2000:	Heritage Overlay 3 (part)

6.36.1 History

Armstrong Street, which extends from the Middle Park railway station to the beach, bisects what had been, in the mid-nineteenth century, a swampy wasteland partly occupied by military rifle butts. Neither the opening of the railway line in 1857, nor the establishment of the railway station in 1860 prompted any residential development in the area. It was the creation of Canterbury Road in 1876, the rebuilding of the railway station in 1880 and the gradual reclamation of the swamp over the next few years that finally encouraged closer settlement towards the end of the 1880s. Initially, such development was concentrated along Canterbury Road, and the contiguous streets to the immediate south. As the number of new houses increased, so to did the demand for community facilities such as churches, schools and shops.

While Armstrong Street appears in the Sands & McDougall Directory as early as 1888, it was initially listed only as a cross street off Canterbury Road, with no actual occupants identified therein. Predictably enough, the first commercial development in Armstrong Street occurred on the prominent corner sites flanking the Canterbury Road intersection, opposite the new railway station. The 1889 directory first recorded three 'vacant' buildings on these sites. These were subsequently revealed as the Middle Park Hotel (now the Gunn Island Hotel) on the south corner, and a pair of residential shops on the north corner. The latter, still identified on their parapet as the Canterbury Buildings, were then occupied by hairdresser Robert Patterson and estate agents Grey & Ashworth.

The 1890 directory reveals that commercial development had begun to spread along Armstrong Street, with seven new listings on the north side of the street. These comprised a baker, an estate agent, two fruiterers, a butcher, a bootmaker and a dairy produce merchant. By 1895, the number of business premises in the block had expanded to nine, designated as Nos 1 to 15 plus the unnumbered baker's shop (with bakehouse at the rear), between Erskine Street and a right-of-way. Tenants changed over the next few years, which variously included a fishmonger, a dressmaker, a plumber, a confectioner and a haberdasher. By 1898, estate agent T R Ashworth had taken over the shop at No 1 and, a year later, opened the Middle Park Telegraph Office. By 1900, a chemist's shop had opened alongside Ashworth's premises, with one F P Chegwiddden as its proprietor. By contrast, there was little commercial development on the southern side of Armstrong Street during that time. Mrs Emily Love, a grocer, is first listed between Richardson Street and Canterbury Road in 1891. Her shop, later designated as No 5, remained the only occupant of the entire block for more than a decade.

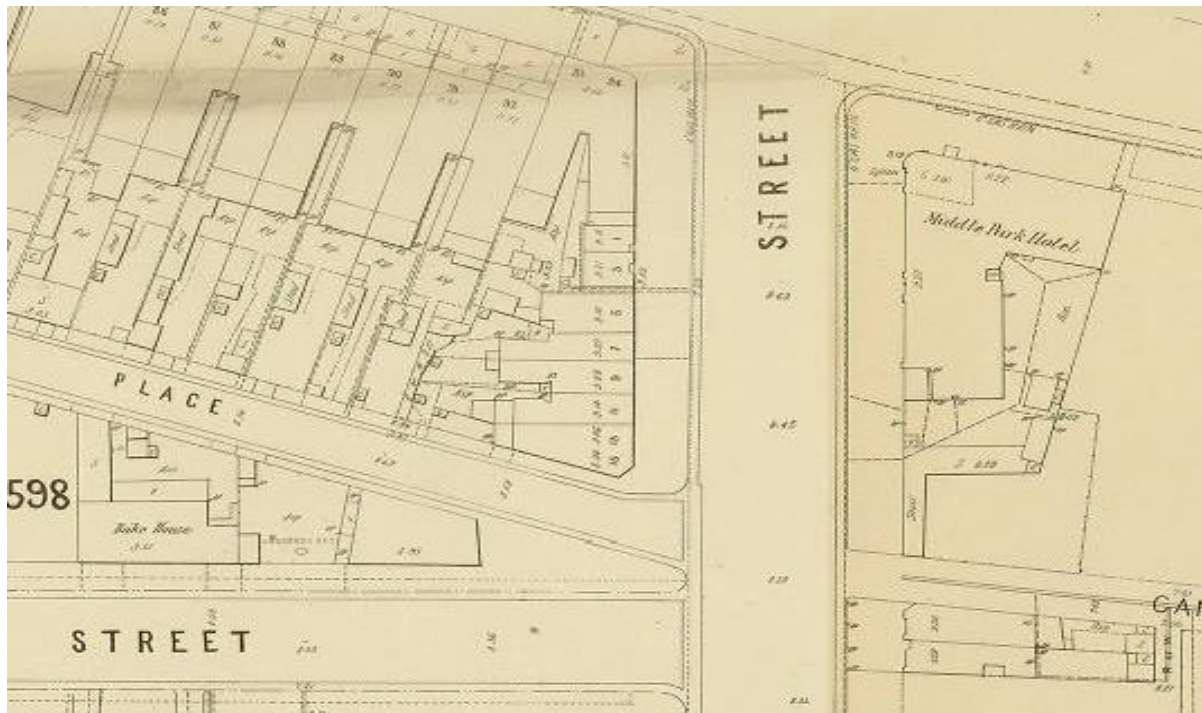


Figure 6.36–I – Part of MMBW Detail Plan (c.1895), showing commercial development along Armstrong Street; note Middle Park Hotel (now Gunn Island Hotel), and bakery on corner of Erskine Street, with bakehouse indicated at rear

(source: Map Collection, Education Resource Centre, Melbourne University)

When the street addressees of properties across South Melbourne were renumbered in 1900, the shops in Armstrong Street at Nos 1 to 15 were re-designated as Nos 4 to 16, while the formerly unnumbered baker's shop (then occupied by P J Esmond) became No 18. The chemist shop at the other end of the strip (then occupied by Alex Murie) became No 2. Development continued, with the 1905 directory noting five new shops in the block between Richardson and Erskine streets. These, initially occupied by a grocer, a newsagent, a draper, a watchmaker and a dairy produce merchant, were later designated as Nos 20, 22, 24, 26 and 34. The gap between was soon filled by the completion of three more shops (Nos 28, 30 and 32), which first appeared in the 1906 directory as 'vacant', but were later occupied by a house agent, butcher and piano tuner. There was no further development along this side of the street until 1911, when the directory recorded four new shops at Nos 36-42, initially occupied by a draper, a pastrycook, a cycle works and a costumer.

Meanwhile, the other side of Armstrong Street remained largely undeveloped. Mrs Love's grocery shop at No 5 was still the only shop, although the 1905 directory noted 'four vacant houses' alongside. It was not until 1911 that the directory noted further commercial expansion, with a new pharmacy opening at No 7 and, on the opposite corner of Canterbury Place, three unnumbered listings for the State Savings Bank, the Middle Park Post Office, and estate agents Watt & Haig. As the postmaster was identified as E H Watt, it is possible that the both the post office and the bank were simply agencies within Watt's real estate office. This was soon followed by a row of four residential shops at Nos 9, 11, 11a and 13 (now Nos 9, 11, 13 and 15). These, first listed in 1912-13, were originally occupied by a bootmaker, a tailor, a dressmaker and an ironmonger. Also in 1913, a new listing appeared for the Middle Park Hall at No 1 – formerly the premises of Watt & Haig estate agents and later (c.1916) to become the Middle Park Theatre.

By 1910, there were no fewer than twenty places of business on the north side of Armstrong Street (designated as Nos 2 to 42), and another ten on the south (Nos 1 to 11b). The next few years saw commercial expansion spread further east along Canterbury Road. The first of these was a motor garage and livery stables operated by one W Robertson (No 106), first recorded in the 1911 directory. By 1914, this had been joined by the new Middle Park Post Office (No 109) and a branch

of the ES&A Bank (No 108), while another branch bank, for the State Savings Bank (No 104), appeared nearby in 1916. Three years later, the directory noted “two shops being built” to the west of Robertson’s garage (Nos 110-111), one of which was subsequently occupied by the grocery chain of Moran & Cato.

By 1920, the businesses in Armstrong Street included three confectioners, two milliners, two chemists, a costumier, a watchmaker, a butcher, a bootmaker, a newsagent and an ironmonger. At that time, the two most enduring vendors were baker P J Esmond, who had been at No 18 since 1900, and Mrs Love, whose grocery at No 5 had been one of the strip’s original retailers back in 1890. She evidently retired or died in the early 1920s, although her former premises continued to operate as a grocer’s shop for another decade thence.



Figure 6.36–2 – Looking east along Armstrong Street, circa 1910s; note cast iron street lamp in centre of road

(source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)



Figure 6.36–3 – South side of Armstrong Street, circa 1950s; note row of four inter-war shops at right side

(source: Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria)

Subsequent changes to the built fabric within the precinct include the replacement of the four houses at Nos 13 to 19 (later renumbered Nos 17 to 23) with a row of single-fronted shops, which took place during the 1920s. Around 1936, a two-storey block of flats and shops, in the fashionable Streamlined Moderne style, was erected at the rear of 34 Armstrong Street, fronting Richardson

Street. The immediate post-war period saw the refacing or rebuilding of the two shops at Nos 19-21. In more recent years, the former post office and ES&A branch bank on Canterbury Road (both rendered defunct during the twentieth century) have been demolished and replaced by new buildings. In 2001, the Middle Park Hotel was refurbished and renamed the Gunn Island Hotel, after the small ornamental island in the centre of nearby Albert Park Lake.

6.36.2 Description

The Armstrong Street Commercial Precinct chiefly comprises those buildings along both sides of the street, between Richardson Street and Canterbury Road, plus some associated development that spreads south along Canterbury Road and north along Richardson Street. All of these buildings are (or were) overtly commercial in origin, with the most common manifestation being the traditional double-storey residential shop – a pattern that was noted in the 1975 heritage study, and remains strongly evident today. There are, however, a few single-storeyed shops, and, as the exception, the massive three-storeyed Gunn Island Hotel at the corner of Canterbury Road and Armstrong Street. The latter, which dominates both streetscapes, is a large Italianate building with a rendered façade delineated by heavily moulded cornices at each floor level, a pierced parapet and a shaped pediment above the curving corner. Its two uppermost levels have rows of rectangular windows with moulded surrounds and wrought iron balconettes.

The Victorian-style shops in the precinct, dating from the period c.1888 to 1903, are broadly similar in their form and detailing. They are typically arranged in pairs (Nos 5-7, 10-12 and 14-16), although there are also rows of four (Nos 20-26) and five (Nos 2-8), plus the atypical freestanding shop (No 18) at the intersection of Erskine Street and Canterbury Place. With the exception of the two fully rendered shops at Nos 16 and 18, these early buildings have face brick facades at their upper levels – some enlivened by polychromy (Nos 2-12) and others since compromised by overpainting (eg Nos 5, 15 and 20-22). The former bakery at No 18 – the only freestanding shop in the precinct – is further distinguished by the survival of its original double-storey bakehouse at the rear (now addressed separately at 123-129 Erskine Street).

One shop (No 7) retains evidence of original painted signage along its parapet – the word *chemist*, which refers to an early (from c.1909) and long-time former occupant. Facades are further embellished with typical boom-style rendered detailing such as moulded cornices, stringcourses (No 34), plain or rusticated piers, dentils (eg No 2-12, 34), orbs (Nos 5, 20-26) and swags (Nos 2-12). In a few notable cases, the cement render retains its original unpainted finish (eg Nos 10-12, 34). Those shops at street intersections (ie Nos 2, 5, 16, 20 and 34) have the traditional splayed corners, marked by pediments of half-round (No 16), triangular (No 34) or segmental (No 5) form. Windows at first floor level are also variously round-arched, rectangular or segmental-arched, typically with timber-framed double-hung sashes, projecting sills and keystones.

The later Edwardian shops, dating from the period 1905 to 1910, are similarly arranged in rows of two (Nos 1-3), three (eg Nos 28-32) or four (Nos 36-42). The double-storey residential shops broadly echo the form and materials of their Victorian counterparts, but are otherwise different in detailing. They are of red brick construction, with facades delineated by rendered banding, canted piers surmounted by rendered orbs, and curved parapets with rendered coping. Windows have timber-framed sashes, either double-hung (Nos 9, 15) or casement (Nos 11, 13), and openings are variously enlivened by bold rendered archivolt (No 28-32), drip moulds (No 1-3) or hoods (No 11, 13). The block of single-storey shops at No 36-42 (erected c.1909) has a simple rendered parapet that incorporates a pattern of recessed panels.

A considerable number of the pre-war shops retain their original shopfront detailing to the street. Some, such as Nos 2-8, 24-26, 28-32, 34 and 36-42, are particularly intact, retaining metal-framed shop windows with highlights (in some cases, with leadlight glazing), splayed entrances with tiled thresholds, and spandrels clad with bold glazed tiling in typical browns and greens. The unusual freestanding shop at No 18 has been altered by the replacement of its original ground floor shopfront (and its upper floor windows) with fixed black-tinted glazing. Several other shops have

modern aluminium-framed shopfronts of similarly recent origin. A number of shops (eg Nos 10-12, 9-15 and 20-22) have Victorian-style verandahs, with curving corrugated galvanised steel roofs supported on fluted cast iron columns with wrought iron lace friezes. Although some of these may be reproductions, they are sympathetic to the era of the precinct. Other shops have modern cantilevered awnings (eg Nos 2-8, 17-23), while some have no verandahs at all (eg Nos 5, 7, 24 and 26).

Along with the Gunn Island Hotel, there are two former business premises on Canterbury Road that stand out as particularly striking elements within the precinct. The former State Bank at No 104 is a double-storey rendered building in the Edwardian Free Classical style. Its asymmetrical façade is articulated by rusticated pilasters with Ionic capitals, with an entrance bay to the left side incorporating a doorway with moulded hood, a canted bay window and a triangular pediment. Alongside, the former motor garage at No 104 is a double-storey painted brick building with a prominent moulded cornice, bays of rectangular windows and, most notably, the original vehicle entrance to the left side, with an arched window at the upper level above. At the rear of the property, fronting the laneway, an early metal BP sign remains to further demonstrate the former use of the building.

More recent buildings in the precinct include shops at No 17-23. These originally comprised a row of four identical inter-war shops with raked parapets, of which only two (Nos 17 and 23) remain. These now flank a later double-fronted shop (No 19-21) with a wide rendered parapet edged with manganese bricks. One of the smaller shopfronts (No 17) has been altered by a discreet second storey addition. Another inter-war building stands at the rear of the corner shop at 34 Armstrong Street. Designated as 253a, b, c and d Richardson Street, this double-storey block comprises three shopfronts with flats above. Dating from c.1936, it has a rendered façade in the Streamlined Moderne style, with curving walls, glass blocks and steel-framed windows. The shopfronts themselves, however, have been altered. The nineteenth century character of the precinct is enhanced by a pair of cast iron street lamps at the Canterbury Road end. These are evidently not original, but are similar to some that are known to have formerly stood in the centre of the street (as seen in early photographs)



Figure 6.36-4 – The Canterbury Buildings (1888) on the corner of Armstrong Street; note cast iron street lamp.



Figure 6.36-5 – The mixture of Victorian, Edwardian and Inter-war Shops along the south of Armstrong Street



Figure 6.36-6 – The mixture of Victorian and Edwardian shops along the north side of Armstrong Street



Figure 6.36-7 – The former motor garage (1911), State Savings Bank (1914) and hotel (1889) on Canterbury Road

6.36.3 References

1. Vardy Map (1855)
2. Cox Map (1866)
3. MMBW Map (1895)
4. Sands & McDougall Directory (various, 1888 onwards)

6.36.4 Thematic Context

- The First Railways
- Tramway and Railway Improvements
- The late Nineteenth Century Boom
- Ways of Life: South Melbourne

6.36.5 Comparative Analysis

There are numerous commercial strips in the City of Port Phillip. Some of the more prominent, such as Bay Street in Port Melbourne, Fitzroy Street in St Kilda, Carlisle Street in Balaclava and Clarendon Street in South Melbourne, have developed (and been redeveloped) over the course of more than a century. Today, these key shopping precincts (all located on major municipal thoroughfares) tend to be characterised by a broad mix of commercial buildings, including shops, hotels and banks from the 1860s and '70s, Boom-era expansion of the 1880s, and layers of Edwardian, inter-war and post-war development.

By contrast, there are relatively few instances where commercial development has developed suddenly and rapidly over a short period of time. Invariably, this was spurred by the creation of new subdivisions and/or the opening of new railway station or tramway routes. When the former orphanage site on Emerald Hill was sold in 1875, the Clarendon Street frontage became available for commercial development. Today, this entire block (between Dorcas and Park streets) still remains characterised by a cohesive strip of fine Boom-era residential shops. In Elwood, it was the opening of the electric tramway in 1912 that initially spurred commercial development along Ormond Road. The first double-storey residential shop appeared there in 1913, followed by many others over the next decade, plus associated businesses such as a picture theatre, bank and motor garage (as was also

the case in Armstrong Street, Middle Park, during the 1910s). Today, the Ormond Road commercial strip still retains much of this late Edwardian/early inter-war character.

However, as a commercial strip that developed rapidly over a short period, Armstrong Street is perhaps most comparable to Glen Eira Road in Elsternwick. As was the case in Middle Park, this was spurred by the opening of the railway station – in this case, in 1912. The contiguous stretch of Glen Eira Road remains strongly characterised by 1910s buildings, with rows of red brick residential shops (eg Nos 31-37, 45-55, and 57-67) forming a fine and cohesive streetscape. A few individual buildings, notably Brimsmead's Pharmacy at No 73, retain original shopfronts. There is also a fine group of three inter-war branch banks at Nos 74-78. The first of these, erected for the State Savings Bank in 1922, is a Free Classical building in a similar vein to its counterpart in Canterbury Road (and was probably designed by the same architects, Sydney Smith & Ogg).

6.36.6 Statement of Significance

What is Significant?

The Armstrong Street Commercial Precinct in Middle Park largely developed between 1888 and 1910 to provide community services for the burgeoning residential settlement in the hitherto undeveloped Middle Park area. The built fabric is largely characterised by rows of double-storey residential shops, complemented by a few single-storey shops, a three-storey Boom-style hotel (1888), a former bank and a former motor garage (both dating from the 1910s) and a double-storey block of shops and flats (c.1936).

How is It Significant?

The precinct is of historical and aesthetic significance to the City of Port Phillip.

Why is It Significant?

Historically, the precinct is significant for associations with an early and significant phase of settlement of Middle Park from the late 1880s, which followed the r of the railway station (1880), and the reclamation of the swampland that had hitherto discouraged any residential development. The shops, mostly erected between 1888 and 1910, were a direct result of the large-scale housing boom that took place in the area during that relatively short period.

Aesthetically, the precinct is significant as a particularly intact streetscape of late Victorian and Edwardian commercial buildings. They demonstrate cohesion through their common scale (primarily double storeyed), materials (primarily face brick) and detailing (rendered banding, arched windows, ornamented parapets). The rows of residential shops, many still retaining cast iron verandahs and original shopfront detailing (eg tiled spandrels and metal-framed windows) are enhanced by a number of more prepossessing commercial buildings, including a three-storey Boom-style hotel, a former bank, and a former motor garage.

6.36.7 Recommendations

Recommended for inclusion in the Schedule to the Heritage Overlay Table in the Port Phillip Planning Scheme.

The preservation of original/early painted signage, shopfronts and verandahs should be encouraged.

The preservation of original bluestone elements (including kerbing, guttering, spoon drains and pitching to laneways and crossovers) should also be encouraged.