

Lot 32 DP12371

Zoned R2 under KLEP2015

33 Young Street, Wahroonga is a c1950 two-storey International style residence with interiors designed by the renowned furniture maker and designer Paul Kafka.

The house was originally designed for Michael Wainberg, a dyer from Annandale. Wainberg and his brother Alexander immigrated from Radom, Poland sometime in the 1920s, with Michael applying for naturalisation in 1933. His brother resided elsewhere in Ku-ring-gai at the prominent residence “Meadowlea” at 22 Sydney Road, East Lindfield from 1955-1972.



October 2020 real estate images from: <https://www.realestate.com.au/sold/property-house-nsw-wahroonga-134579318>

History of the site

This land was part of an early 2000-acre crown grant to John Terry Hughes in 1842. A substantial residential subdivision of relevant land occurred in 1922 under DP11230, into large acre lots. In September 1923, the NSW Realty Co Limited acquired lots 16 to 33 of this estate, totalling over 17 acres in size. NSW Realty Co Limited promptly re-subdivided the land under the current plan, DP12371, known as the “Brundah Park Estate.” The subject site officially came into being at this point, as lot 32, at a size of 39 perches.

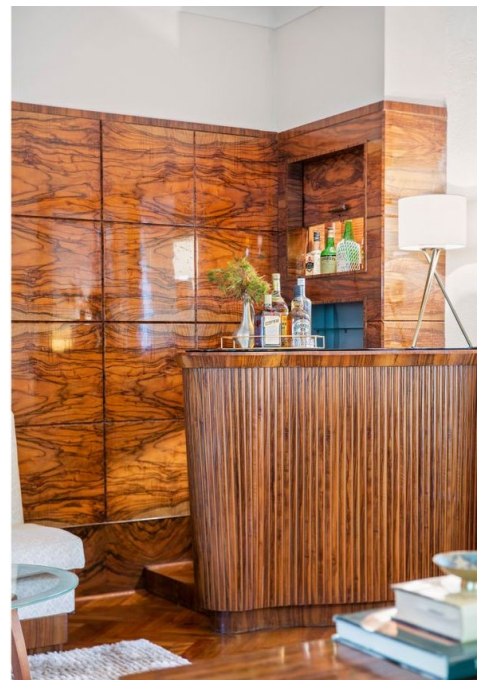
Lot 32 was not transferred to a new owner until January 1943, when it was first acquired by Alexander Wainberg and Michael Wainberg, both of Annandale, Dyers, as joint tenants. The 1943 aerials clearly show the subject lot as empty, but indicate that the sparse development around the site was increasing. The Wainbergs, Polish-Jewish brothers immigrated from Radom, Poland in 1928, with Michael applying for naturalisation in 1933. His application for naturalisation notes his

name was Mieczyslaw Wainberg, known as Michael Wainberg. In July 1949, the lot was transferred to the said Michael Wainberg of Annandale, Dyer, as sole proprietor.



In 1950, M Wainberg lodged a BA (#1713) for a brick dwelling in Young Street, Wahroonga, Lot #32.

Though the architect of this house is presently unknown, the interior designer for this residence was Paul Kafka, a highly significant designer and furniture maker.



October 2020 real estate images from: <https://www.realestate.com.au/sold/property-house-nsw-wahroonga-134579318>

In January 1971, the property was transferred to Terence Joseph Wilson of Mosman, Dental surgeon and Veronica Maxine Wilson, his wife as joint tenants.

In May 1974, the property was transferred to John Fisher of Wahroonga, Company Director and Gladys Cynthia Fisher, his wife as joint tenants.

In June 1979, the property was transferred to Cedric George Holden of Wahroonga, chartered accountant and Patricia Mary Holden, his wife as tenants in common. No further transfers were recorded before a new (inaccessible) certificate of title was issued in 1979.

Significance of the designer

Paul Kafka was a significant interior designer and furniture designer who played an important role in the Modern Movement, through his collaboration with famed émigré architects like Harry Seidler, Hugh Buhrich, Hugo Stossel and others. The following biography of Kafka has been excerpted from the Design and Art Australian Online database:

"The son of a Viennese furniture maker Paul Ernst Kafka was born in Vienna on 1 July 1907 [1]. Experience in his father's factory and an apprenticeship in another Viennese furniture factory gave him a good grounding in the more practical aspects of furniture making, but he is also said to have studied furniture and interior design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna].

During the 1930s Kafka worked as a furniture and interior designer with a furniture retail store in Vienna and in 1939 he and his wife emigrated to Australia. Kafka worked for the redoubtable Ralph Symonds, an entrepreneurial Sydney plywood manufacturer, before establishing a small furniture factory in 187 William Street, Darlinghurst, in 1941. About 1945 Kafka moved to larger premises at 161 Botany Road, Waterloo where he employed four tradesmen, two Italians and two Australians. His company was listed in 1948 directories as a 'Manufacturer of Modern Exclusive Furniture' and from 1951 to 1967 was registered with the New South Wales Furniture Manufacturers' Guild (formed 1948) as 'Paul Kafka Exclusive Furniture Pty Ltd'.

In the 1950s and 60s Kafka exhibited regularly at the Ideal Homes Show and the Building Information Centre in Sydney and at the height of his business in the late 50s was employing about 40 staff]. During the 1960s, as imports competed with locally-made furniture, Kafka concentrated on work for hotels such as the Sheraton and the Chevron and for the Travelodge motel chain. He died in Sydney on 15 May 1972.

Kafka's clientele ranged from private home owners to architects and interior decorators to corporations, but what distinguished many of his clients were their European origins. Like Kafka, many were also Jewish refugees from war-torn Europe and there was a particular concentration of these clients in Sydney's eastern suburbs. Apart from their common European heritage what attracted many to Kafka's work was its stylishness and fine craftsmanship, qualities that were part of a strong tradition in European cabinet-making, but were less common in Australian post-war furniture.

Kafka produced furniture, particularly built-in cabinet work, for a number of Sydney's European-born architects, themselves amongst the small group of pioneering modernists practising in Australia at the time. Harry Seidler was a notable early client. Like Kafka, Seidler and his parents, Max and Rose, were Viennese and no doubt these shared origins, as well as a common interest in modernist concepts, helped reinforce their professional relationship.

Kafka completed built-in and freestanding furniture for Seidler's landmark 'Rose Seidler' house (Wahroonga, 1948-50, now managed by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales) and for several other Seidler projects. Kafka also worked with the late Hugh Buhrich, a German-born architect whose idiosyncratic form of modernism is belatedly receiving the recognition it deserves. Henry Epstein, another of Sydney's early émigré modernists, commissioned Kafka to create furniture for a number of his houses, notably the Chaim and Florence Hillman house in Roseville in 1950 (4). Kafka's cabinet work for this radical, flat-roofed cubic design was largely intact when the house was sold in 1995 amid much media attention. Kafka's own house, a flat-roofed, concrete and glass essay in modernism in suburban Roseville, was designed about 1950 by Hungarian-born Hugo Stossel.

Described as a 'functional house that is different' in the May 1952 issue of Australian House & Garden, it featured much beautifully-detailed cabinet work by Kafka.

According to Neil Sear, a cabinet-maker who worked for Kafka from 1948 to 1966, Kafka was a very astute businessman and played an important entrepreneurial role in the operation of the company. He was also very fastidious and insisted on traditional construction techniques and a high level of hand finishing. While Kafka had some training in design it seems he employed designer/draftsmen to produce art work for the firm and to draw up designs for interiors and individual pieces.

During the 1950s a Dutch designer, Alfons Worms, worked for Kafka and in the 1960s he employed George Surtees, a Hungarian-born designer. Kafka's working method, according to Surtees, was to meet with clients and then provide the designer with a rough sketch of the client's requirements for further interpretation and development.

While Kafka's furniture can often be identified by a company label, his distinctive use of highly-figured veneers is also a characteristic distinguishing feature. Kafka's favoured timbers included Italian walnut and burr elm, stripy zebrana, Macassar ebony and sapele wood, as well as sycamore, Queensland maple and silver ash. Borders of distinctive crossbanding were a common feature of both built-in and freestanding cabinet work with the occasional inclusion of marquetry patterns and decorative motifs, as in the Powerhouse Museum's stylish cocktail cabinet of 1954.

Kafka's love of patterned veneers was no doubt influenced by the strong Austrian tradition of using highly figured woods to enliven otherwise relatively plain, functional designs, a tradition that extended from the Biedermeier period of the first half of the 19th century through to furniture designed by members of the Wiener Werkstätte in the early years of the 20th century and the Art Deco style of the inter-war years. Indeed, the strongly geometric design of much of Kafka's furniture of the 1940s and 50s remained firmly rooted in the European Art Deco or 'art moderne' style prevalent during the late 1920s and 1930s when his career in Austria was just emerging. Furniture such as the cocktail cabinet and Kafka's tiered, mirror glass-topped coffee tables, and interiors like the Vacluse dining room of the late 50s with its dramatic asymmetrical geometry [5] owe an obvious debt to the inter-war 'modernist' aesthetic. Kafka's Austrian heritage and his penchant for decorative veneers largely inured him to the fashion for the blonde timbers and organic forms of Scandinavian design in the post-war years.

Paul Kafka's furniture may not have reflected the latest international design trends and may have been subject to a certain 'overstatement' at times, but it nevertheless contributed immeasurably to the richness of Australia's post-war furniture industry. In a country only just beginning to emerge from its pre-war isolation, Kafka's stylish, sophisticated and well-crafted cabinet work acted as an important conduit for the transmission of European styles and standards of craftsmanship to Australia."

Comparative analysis with other Kafka designed interiors:

Paul Ernst Kafka's work initially focused in the 1950s and 1960s on furniture and interior designs for residential use, as demonstrated in his regular exhibitions at the Ideal Homes Show and Building Information Centre in Sydney. Into the 1960s, Kafka began to focus more on securing work for hotels to ensure reliable business during a time when international imports made the market particularly competitive.

Given the movable and ephemeral nature of Kafka's furniture designs, it is those buildings which possess both built-in furniture and other interior designs, finishes and fittings that are of most relevance to a comparative analysis for 33 Young Street. On the basis of available information and surviving evidence of Kafka's work, it appears this property is one of only a few identified as retaining relatively intact internal designs. Pending an in-depth assessment following internal inspection of the interiors of the house, the significance of this property may be further underscored.

40 Findlay Avenue, Roseville, also known as "Hillman House" (located in Willoughby LGA) is a Henry Epstein designed modernist house which had significant Kafka interiors.¹ Unfortunately, substantial portions of important built-in furniture were removed prior to the heritage listing of the house. However, in June 2010, Willoughby City Council denied an application that posed further removal of significant internal elements designed by Kafka (joinery, staircase), which has set a precedent for the protection of Modernist interiors in heritage items. This item reflects the significance of the Kafka interiors (especially in conjunction with the work of an émigré architect) and the prominence of Kafka, even where extant interior designs are only partially intact. Given that 33 Young Street retains both built in furniture and significant internal elements like joinery, it is a more intact and likely more rare example.

11 Eton Road, Lindfield, also known as "Kafka House" (located in Ku-ring-gai LGA) is a house designed by Hugo Stossell for Paul Kafka himself, which accordingly had extensive Kafka interiors.² Unfortunately, by the time this modernist house was flagged to Ku-ring-gai Council, the significant interiors had been stripped. Given that this was the main reason the house was flagged to Council by the community, it was not listed after its assessment. This reflects the significance of Kafka interiors which in this case determined the fate of the building. This further underscores the significance and rarity of Kafka interiors in Ku-ring-gai given this substantial loss in the designer's own home and the hands of later owners.

1 Ailsa Close, East Lindfield, also known as "Fogl House" (located in Ku-ring-gai LGA) is a house built 1970-1971 to a design by Frank Lloyd Wright purchased by the owner in the USA, with extensive Paul Kafka designed interiors. This dwelling is presently not listed but will be considered in an upcoming Ku-ring-gai Post-War Heritage Study as it appears highly likely to meet the threshold for at least local listing. Though not listed, given the tight-knit ownership of this house over time, it appears to have interiors that are even more intact than those at 33 Young Street.

71 Clissold Road, Wahroonga, also known as Rose Seidler House (located in Ku-ring-gai LGA) is a state-listed heritage item built in 1950 to a design by Harry Seidler for his mother Rose. It is considered a highly influential, seminal work in Modernist architecture in Australia. Seidler engaged Kafka to fabricate furniture for this house based on Seidler's own designs – items included the dining table, coffee table, tray-mobile, sofa and fitted cabinetry.³ Though built to Seidler's designs rather than being Kafka originals like at 33 Young Street, these are extremely significant interiors

¹ "Hillman House" by Sydney Living Museums: <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/documenting-nsw-homes/hillman-house>

² Internal Ku-ring-gai Council records.

³ "A new way of Living" by Sydney Living Museums: <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/stories/new-way-living>

as reflected through the state listing of the item, and memorialize the significant contributions of émigré architects and designers in Sydney in this period,

12 Serpentine Parade, Vaucluse (located in Woollahra LGA) was refurbished by Polish Architect Henry Kurzer in 1959 with interiors (specifically custom-made furniture and cabinetry) by Paul Kafka.⁴ The house was commissioned by Mr and Mrs Moses, retailers. The house retained the Kafka interiors until 1991 when it was refurbished, at which time several elements of the interior were auctioned and acquired by the Historic Houses Trust. Though no longer intact and not listed as a result, this case demonstrates the significance of the Kafka interior designs as reflected by the acquisition of his work by an important institution like the HHT (now Sydney Living Museums).

Other known projects of Kafka – of which evidence survives to varying extents – include 19/123 Macleay Street Potts Point, of which the Powerhouse Museum holds 7 drawings of different furniture items and lounge room elements, and 861 New South Head Road, Rose Bay, which contained some items of significant internal furniture still in 2011 when a major DA was lodged for the remodelling of the property.⁵ It would appear that both of these addresses have since lost their Kafka designed interiors with items destroyed, resold or acquired by museums. This would also appear to be the case with the large amount of cabinetry Kafka design for hotel chains in Sydney as illustrated below, given the changeable and trend-driven nature of hotel interiors.⁶ The above projects listed indicate the relative scarcity of intact Kafka interiors and the increasing threat that such examples of his work are under. The comparative assessment supports proceeding with a heritage listing for 33 Young Street, Wahroonga.



Max Dupain & Associates image of Kafka cabinetry in hotel chain from AFR “Sydney’s Forgotten Mid-century Modernists.”

Preliminary heritage assessment against heritage listing criteria

Based on an initial assessment, the dwelling is considered to have high potential to meet the threshold for listing, based on the standard criterion for listing outlined by the Heritage Council of

⁴ “Serpentine Parade House” by Sydney Living Museums: <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/documenting-nsw-homes/serpentine-parade-house>

⁵ “Furniture designs by Paul Kafka” by MAAS: <https://collection.maas.museum/object/53457> ; DA 678/2010/1 Woollahra Municipal Council Application Assessment Panel report - 861 New South Head Road, Vaucluse (online)

⁶ “Sydney’s Forgotten Mid-century Modernists” by Shelley Gare in the Australian Financial Review, 31 October 2020: <https://www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/arts-and-culture/sydneys-forgotten-midcentury-modernists-20170719-gxehcb>

New South Wales. In particular, the house appears likely to have significant historical, associational, aesthetic and rarity values.

- a) an item is important in the course, or pattern, of NSW's cultural or natural history;

33 Young Street, Wahroonga, appears likely to have historical significance for its ability to demonstrate patterns of European immigration in the inter-war and post-war periods following the series of conflicts in the continent. The immigration of the Polish-Jewish owners of 33 Young Street in the late 1920s is indicative of Jewish immigration to Australia at the time, as a result of growing Polish nationalism and anti-Semitism. Their later engagement of a prominent emigre designer, Paul Kafka, and possibly an émigré architect, further demonstrate the immigration of European individuals to Australia and their significant contributions to a variety of artistic, architectural, intellectual and professional communities.

- b) an item has strong or special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in NSW's cultural or natural history;

33 Young Street, Wahroonga, appears likely to have historic associational value with the designer of its high-quality interiors, Paul Kafka, as a fine and intact example of the work of the famed emigre designer and furniture maker.

- c) an item is important in demonstrating aesthetic characteristics and/or a high degree of creative or technical achievement in NSW;

33 Young Street, Wahroonga, appears likely to have aesthetic value as a fine and intact example of the work of Paul Kafka. It may also have aesthetic value for its International Style architecture though the architect on the project is presently unknown.

- d) an item has strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group in NSW for social, cultural or spiritual reasons;

At present, it is not known whether 33 Young Street has a strong or special association with a contemporary identifiable group, however this would be the subject of further research.

- e) an item has potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of NSW's cultural or natural history;

At present, it is not known whether 33 Young Street has particular research or technical significance, however this would be the subject of further research.

- f) an item possesses uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of NSW's cultural or natural history;

33 Young Street, Wahroonga, appears likely to have rarity value as a particular intact and high-quality example of the interior design of Paul Kafka, of which there appear to be few comparable known examples. Kafka's own house, designed by architect Hugo Stossel, has had its original interiors stripped by a later owner due to a lack of protection.

- g) an item is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of NSW's
 - cultural or natural places; or
 - cultural or natural environments.

33 Young Street, Wahroonga, appears likely to have representative value as a good example of an International Style building possessing key characteristics of the style. It also has representative value for its ability to demonstrate interior design associated with significant interior designer and furniture maker, Paul Kafka.

Statement of Significance

As a good example of International style architecture, 33 Young Street Wahroonga has historic and aesthetic significance and representative value. These same values are evident internally through the building's strong association with the designer of its high-quality interiors, Paul Kafka, as a fine and intact example of the work of the famed emigre designer and furniture maker.

The building appears likely to demonstrate rarity as a particularly intact and high-quality example of the interior design of Paul Kafka, of which there appear to be few comparable known examples.

33 Young Street, Wahroonga, appears likely to have historical significance for its ability to demonstrate patterns of European immigration in the inter-war and post-war periods following the series of conflicts in the continent.

Summary

The property was brought to Council's attention in mid-October however there has been difficulty with identifying the architect, which is still unknown. It was recently sold (12 October 2020) and is not identified as a heritage item or located within a Heritage conservation area. The recent real estate campaign promoted the property as "*an excellent opportunity to renovate or rebuild and capitalise on the excellent location*" and therefore its potential heritage value, particularly its interiors, are considered vulnerable to harm.

Conclusion

That an interim heritage order be placed on the property to enable further research to take place.

Sources / Further reading:

The Sydney Morning Herald - Thu 19 Jan 1933 - Page 1 – Advertising:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16946301>

"Paul Ernst Kafka" by Michael Bogle. Entry in the Design and Art Australia online database:

<https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/paul-ernst-kafka/biography/>