

Historic Heritage Evaluation

**Firth House
18 Vera Street**



June 2021

Historic Heritage Evaluation	
Prepared by	NZ Heritage Properties on behalf of Wellington City Council
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Date	June 2021
Site visit(s)	N/A
Version	Final
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Revisions	
Cover image	Wellington City Council, 17 November 2020.

Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to the work by Wellington City Council staff which has gone before in assessing the values and the history of Firth House.



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Executive Summary

Firth House at 18 Vera Street has been nominated for inclusion on the Wellington District Plan Schedule of Historic Heritage Buildings. The evaluation of the building's heritage values shows it to hold significant architectural and social importance and some integrity value as it retains some original form and fabric from Cedric Firth's residence. The following report includes research and an evaluation of the house against the Wellington City Council heritage assessment criteria.

Firth House is an example of Aotearoa New Zealand Modernist architecture. Designed by Cedric Harold Firth, a prominent New Zealand Modernist architect and writer, Firth House was based on his Modernist philosophies of construction design. Designed as the architect's family's residence, Firth House provides an understanding of social concerns facing designers in the 1940s and displays the aspirations held for an ideal Aotearoa New Zealand home in the period.¹

Cedric Firth had a strong social concern for accessible, standardised, and good quality public housing to be realised through urban planning on modern lines. Firth House exhibits a compactness and verticality generally associated with the European Modern movement. The house was designed with a combined living/dining room and a kitchen at the entry level and three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs.²

The building and environs were significantly altered under the guidance of Wellington architect Barbara Webster in 1995. Further redesigns and construction were undertaken in 2005 under the direction of Wellington architect Stuart Gardyne. These two redesigns significantly modernised the house and many interior original features no longer exist.³

Firth House has **significant** historic heritage values which contribute to our understanding of the development of Modernism in a **national** context. The house is a **representative** example of architecturally designed Modernist dwellings (and one that was designed and lived in by prominent Modernist architect) and was at the forefront of development in the **regional** and **national** contexts. Firth House has **some** integrity value in its form and fabric, and the house also has a strong association with Firth, who lived in the house for his professional life. The setting is integral to Firth's design and contributes **some significance** to the understanding of the building's history and development, as well as providing an appreciation of Firth's design philosophy. Overall, Firth House meets the threshold for eligibility as a

¹ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

² Wellington City Council, "Firth House 18 Vera Street PFG Summary Report."

³ Attwood, "Correspondence Re Heritage Status 18 Vera Street."



Historic Heritage Building and is recommended to be added to the District Plan Schedule of Historic Items.

Summary Statement of Significance

Firth House has **significant** historic heritage values which contribute to our understanding of the development of Modernist housing locally as well as social housing design policy at a **national** level. The house has **significant** historic and architectural values for its association with, and residence of, prominent and influential architect Cedric Firth. The surroundings have **some significance** to the understanding of the building's history and development as well as providing an appreciation of Firth's design philosophy. The house is a **representative** and highly **influential example** of an architecturally designed, relatively early Modernist dwelling and one influencing national state house design philosophy in the ensuing years.

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to consider the Firth House located at 18 Vera Street, Karori, Wellington against Wellington City Council's criteria for evaluation of historic heritage.

The document has been prepared by NZ Heritage Properties on the specific instructions of our client, Wellington City Council. It is intended solely for the use by Wellington City Council in accordance with the agreed scope of work.

Scope

This assessment is a desktop study and is based on documentary sources and images. No site visit was undertaken. The interiors were not reviewed, other than from information determined through secondary sources and Council records. Values are considered against Wellington City Council and Greater Wellington Regional Council criteria for inclusion on the District Plan Heritage Schedule.

The chronology of the site was pieced together using primary sources such as Wellington City Council Archives, Alexander Turnbull Library, and Land Information NZ records.



Heritage Inventory Report

Site Detail	
Site address or address(es) and/or location	18 Vera Street, Karori, Wellington
Property Name	Firth House
Other names	
Legal Description(s) and Record of Title identifier(s), Deeds register and/or Gate notice information	Lot 1, DP 12166
NZTM grid reference	NZTM_E 1746115 _N 5428042
District Plan Reference Number	N/A
Sites of significance to Māori	None
WCC Heritage Area	None
HNZPT listed	Not Listed
HNZPT category	None
Archaeological site (Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014, Section 6)	Unknown
New Zealand Archaeological Association (NZAA) site record number(s)	N/A
Constructed	1941
Significant alterations or additions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1965 Dwelling Alterations • 1996 Significant dwelling and environs alterations 2005 Replace boundary fence and retaining wall, replace membrane and ply on carport roof, 3 new exterior windows and doors. Significant modifications.
Architect	Cedric Harold Firth
Builder	Miller and Campbell
Former uses	Residential house



Current uses	Residential house
Earthquake-prone Building Status at the date of assessment.	

Extent: WCC Onemap, accessed June 2021



Historical Summary

Land and Māori history

Te Whānganui-a-Tara Wellington's nearly circular harbour (about 10 kilometres in diameter) began as a shallow basin between two tilted land blocks. Repeated uplifting along the Wellington Fault raised the block on the western side, creating a cliff from Thorndon to the Hutt Valley. The block to the east tilted down towards the



fault, creating a depression that later filled with water.⁴ Matiu (Somes Island) and Mākaro (Ward Island) are the exposed peaks of a submerged ridge running parallel with the extensive ridges of Miramar Peninsula and Hataitai.⁵

Early Māori narratives tell that Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington harbour was originally a land-locked lake, home to two large taniwha. One taniwha, energetic Ngake, forged a passage from Te Awakairangi the Hutt River to the open sea, creating the entrance to the harbour. The second, Whataitai, following in Ngake's wake, became stranded with the outgoing tide and eventually died. Whataitai's spirit took the form of a bird, that flew to the top of the peak and cried farewell before departing to Ranginui – hence its name Tangi te keo.⁶ The very top of Matairangi Mount Victoria is still known as Tangi te Keo. Over the years Whātaïtai's body turned to stone and today is known as Hataitai.⁷

The Te Whānganui-a-Tara area of Aotearoa New Zealand was said to have been first explored by Kupe. Kupe set off from his homeland Hawaiki in pursuit of a giant wheke/octopus. The pursuit led him to Aotearoa New Zealand, where he finally caught the creature in Raukawakawa Cook Strait⁸. In the landscape later known as Te Whānganui-a-Tara Wellington, he named rock formations near Cape Palliser Ngā Ra o Kupe (the sails of Kupe), Arapāoa, Mana, the islands Matiu (Somes Island) and Mākaro (Ward Island) before returning to Hawaiki.⁹ These names were preserved as later iwi came to settle the land.

Mana whenua of Te Whānganui-a-Tara trace their origins to the subsequent arrival of the Kurahaupō waka. Some traditions name Whātonga as the captain of the waka. He later explored Te Ika a Maui the North Island from Māhia south, naming the harbour Te Whānganui-a-Tara, for his son Tara.¹⁰ Descendants include Ngāi Tara, Rangitane, Muaupoko, Ngāti Apa and Ngāti Ira.¹¹ The area around Te Whanganui-a-Tara was occupied for centuries by these various Māori groups.¹² Two tribes of Ngāi Tara (in the area from c1405-1650) and

⁴ Adkins, "The Great Harbour of Tara. Traditional Place Names and Sites of Wellington Harbour and Environs."

⁵ Adkins.

⁶ Wellington City Libraries, "Te Aro Pa and Matairangi."

⁷ Grace and Ministry of Education, "Ngake and Whātaïtai the Taniwha of Wellington Harbour." The site Tangi te keo, on the Matairangi Mount Victoria peak and ridgeline is a site of significance to Māori and recorded as M72 in the WCC District Plan.

⁸ Greater Wellington Regional Council website [Māori history of the Greater Wellington region | Greater Wellington Regional Council \(gw.govt.nz\)](https://www.gw.govt.nz/māori-history-of-the-greater-wellington-region/) Accessed November 2021.

⁹ Reid, "Muaūpoko - Early History"; Royal, "First Peoples in Māori Tradition - Kupe."

¹⁰ Waitangi Tribunal, "Te Whanganui a Tara Me Ona Takiwa," 17–18.

¹¹ Love, "Te Āti Awa of Wellington"; Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, "Research Report on Heritage Values Hannah Playhouse, Wellington."

¹² Report, "Te Whanganui A Tara Me Ona Takiwa - Report on the Wellington District."



Ngāti Ira (in the area until 1829) amalgamated and became known as Ngāti Ira. Ngāti Ira were the inhabitants of Te Whanganui-a-Tara and its environs including Porirua and the area up to the Kāpiti Coast.¹³ The principal chief of Ngāti Ira in the late 1810s, Whanake and his son Te Kekerengu both lived on the west coast of Te Whānganui-a-Tara near Porirua Harbour.

Incoming tribes from far to the north of Te Whānganui-a-Tara area began to push out Ngāti Ira, and they faced consistent pressure as an influx of people continued from western Waikato and Taranaki.¹⁴ Many war parties and migration of other tribes, such as Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Whatua, and Ngāti Toa, drove the last remaining Ngāti Ira out of the area.¹⁵ Ngāti Toa and its allies defeated Ngāti Ira and gained ascendancy over the Kāpiti Coast in 1824, although some Ngāti Ira continued to live at Porirua.¹⁶ By 1840, the groups holding customary rights within the Port Nicholson block were complex, with Te Āti Awa, Taranaki, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Tama, and Ngāti Toa all claiming rights established through conquest, occupation, and use of resources. The wider Te Whānganui-a-Tara Wellington region then and now hosted a number of iwi, including Te Āti Awa, Muaupoko, Rangitāne o Wairarapa, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Toa (Ngāti Toarangatira), and Te Atiawa ki Whakarongotai.¹⁷

It was in this complex setting that in 1839, the New Zealand Company chose Te Whānganui-a-Tara Wellington's Port Nicholson as the site for its first settlement of British immigrants.¹⁸

Karori

Karori or Kaharore translates as 'the ridge for snaring birds' and occupies a large, elevated valley in the hills to the west of Wellington city. Regarded as Wellington's first suburb, while there is no known history of the valley being permanently occupied by Māori, it was a well-known mahinga kai or food gathering site. The arrival of colonial settlers saw the burning of the original forest and the valley turned into farmland. The first Pākehā settler in Karori was John Yule of Glasgow, who cleared 20 acres of forest on his section with his younger brother Moses. By 1845, Karori recorded 215 inhabitants - 109 of them under the age of 14 years old. A small, fortified post was constructed in 1845 by a group of armed police from Wellington that became known as "The Stockade" in response to fears of attacks from local Māori. While there were no attacks, the stockade was used for a church service and was used as a place to grind grain.

¹³ Murray, "A History of Tawa."

¹⁴ Report, "Te Whanganui A Tara Me Ona Takiwa - Report on the Wellington District."

¹⁵ Murray, "A History of Tawa."

¹⁶ Murray.

¹⁷ "Brooklyn Wellington."

¹⁸ Report, "Te Whanganui A Tara Me Ona Takiwa - Report on the Wellington District."



Karori experienced a gold rush when the valley of the Upper Kaiwharawhara Stream was subject to intensive gold mining activity between 1869 and 1873. This activity eventually led to the building of the Lower Karori Dam in 1873. In 1888, a section of land was purchased by a syndicate and prepared for sale by building roads and naming them after the members of the syndicate and their families. Both Wellington and Karori expanded towards each other, the two urban areas becoming gradually connected, aided by the construction of the Karori Tunnel in 1901. The Borough of Karori was amalgamated into the City of Wellington in 1920.

The next section provides the results of documentary research into the historical background of Firth House. This research provides context and informs our understanding of the heritage values in the structure.

Modernism in New Zealand

Modernism was a style of architecture that emerged internationally in the early twentieth century. It rejected Victorian and Edwardian ornamentation as overly decorative, and favoured a simpler, cleaner style. The minimalist style considered the function of buildings before the form, made use of new materials that were becoming available, and developed structural innovations.¹⁹

New Zealand architects were initially introduced to Modernism through international publications and through their own travels. During the 1930s the new Modernist style began to appear in New Zealand. Government architect Thomas Mair's, 1938 design for the Departmental Building in Wellington "bridged the art deco and modernist styles".²⁰ New Zealand Modernist houses also appeared as early as 1938, with Humphrey Hall designing his own Modernist home in Timaru, as did Robin Simpson in Auckland.²¹ Vernon Brown's Haigh House, built in Auckland in 1942, was unquestionably Modernist with a simple 'L'-shaped rectangular plan form, and mono-pitched roof.²² The arrival of European architects taking refuge from Nazi Germany such as Ernst Plischke, a leading advocate of the style, further encouraged the advance of Modernism. By the end of World War Two, Modernism was the dominant architectural approach in New Zealand.²³

¹⁹ Royal Institute of British Architects, "Modernism."

²⁰ Schrader, "Public, Commercial and Church Architecture - Modernism, 1930 to 1970."

²¹ Wellington City, "Historic Heritage Evaluation Alington House."

²² Gatley, "Long Live The Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984"; Wellington City, "Historic Heritage Evaluation Alington House."

²³ Schrader, "Public, Commercial and Church Architecture - Modernism, 1930 to 1970."



Local Modernism

Firth House was at the forefront of development in both regional and national contexts. Designed in 1941, Firth House is one of the earliest Modernist houses in Wellington and New Zealand. Built as Firth's family's residence, the house is compact and incorporates all the characteristics of the Modernism style. Firth House paved the way for a number of Modernist houses in the hill suburbs of Wellington in the late 1940s and 1950s and contributes to our understanding of the development of Modernism in a New Zealand context.²⁴

Firth House embodies Cedric Firth's work and his attitudes towards design²⁵ as a New Zealand architect, writer, and proponent of the international Modernism style. Firth designed living spaces centred on the nuclear family and believed in creating architecture that provided for all needs without surplus detail and adornment.²⁶

In 1936, Firth argued that New Zealand's most pressing reality of urban expansion was not among the 'remoter features of the landscape', but in urban slums whose 'ugliness and tastelessness' were evidence of 'the relentless energy characteristic of times of industrial expansion'.²⁷ The solution, in Firth's view, must be radical: 'If housing is to be done at all it cannot be a patchwork. It is more than a reform. It is either an entirely new way of providing a new standard of city environment, or it is nothing at all'.²⁸ Architecture needed to address the 'big picture'.²⁹ The models Firth proposed were those of Vienna and Germany. Firth argued that the German precedent for one or two storey dwellings less than 7 metres (20 foot) wide "would seem to present a relatively unexplored field of real possibility and potential merit" in New Zealand.³⁰ Firth used these philosophies to help shape government policies while he worked at the Department of Housing Construction in the decade from 1939 to 1949. It was in 1941 that Firth designed his own house at 18 Vera Street, after purchasing the land from the Samuel Marsden Collegiate School Trust Board.

Firth House is simple in form, is timber clad and framed with concrete foundations, with the design derived from the ideal state house.³¹ Firth designed

²⁴ WCC, "Historic Heritage Evaluation Alington House."

²⁵ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

²⁶ Luke, "A Blissfully Unaltered Wellington."

²⁷ Firth, "Problems of Working-Class Housing."

²⁸ Newton, "'With the Back of an Axe': Reading the Group Architects."

²⁹ Newton.

³⁰ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

³¹ Bowron.



the house for himself based on his philosophies of Modernist construction design and as the potential epitome of New Zealand state housing.³² He had a strong social concern for accessible, standardised and good quality public housing, to be realised through urban planning on modern lines, and influenced Government policies on these matters. He was passionate about promoting the International Style in New Zealand architecture, introducing New Zealand to this style and demonstrating how it could work within the New Zealand context.

Timber shiplap cladding and large banks of glass windows were an example of Firth's philosophy on topography and siting dwellings. He believed that dwellings should be planned and arranged on site to make the most of any view and placed to expose the site to the sun as much as possible.³³ Firth House exhibits a compactness and verticality within its two storeys and basement generally associated with European Modern houses.

Firth produced the promotional material for the State Advances Corporation of New Zealand housing display at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition of 1939–40. The international interest generated from this exhibition and the Government's housing scheme led to his 1949 publication *State Housing in New Zealand*,³⁴ which depicts an example plan of a two-storey, three-bedroom house (such as Firth House) as a common model or type in state house design³⁵ Firth House was awarded second place for prefabricated design in a 1943 House Building Competition.³⁶

Firth raised his family at Firth House and lived there until his death in 1994. Since then, the house has been repainted and repaired over the decades. The dwelling was significantly altered in 1996 under the guidance of architect Barbara Webster. Further redesign and construction was undertaken in 2007 under the direction of architect Stuart Gardyne. The boundary fence and retaining wall were replaced, as well as the membrane and ply on the carport roof. Three new exterior windows and doors were added. While no longer the most authentic example of Firth's work, Firth House is a testament to the social concerns facing designers in the 1940s and the aspirational ideal of a New Zealand home in this period.³⁷

³² Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

³³ Bowron.

³⁴ Bowron, "Firth, Cedric Harold."

³⁵ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

³⁶ "House Building Competition Awards."

³⁷ Bowron.



Photographs and Images



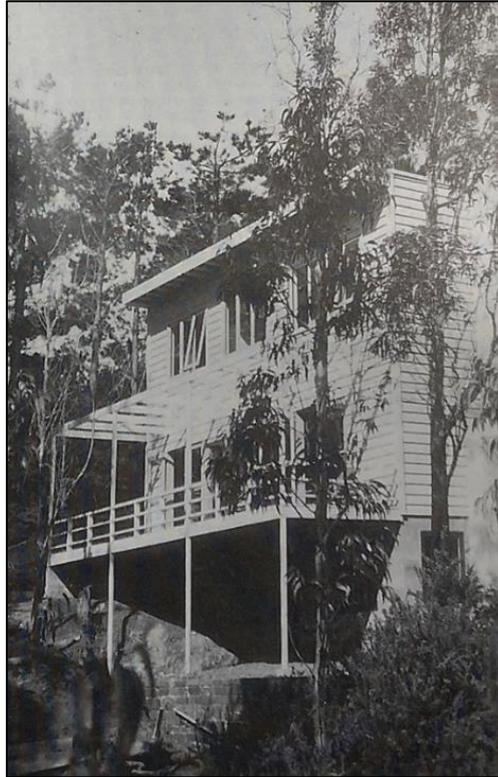
Exterior view of Firth House, Photographed by an unknown photographer 1941, PAColl-5870-2-16, Alexander Turnbull Library.



Front elevation of Firth House.³⁸

³⁸ Bowron.





The Firth House viewed from its garden.³⁹



Firth House, showing alterations c1990s.⁴⁰

³⁹ Bowron.

⁴⁰ Gatley, Julia, "Long Live The Modern - New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984."





Firth House, showing living room c1990s.⁴¹



View of the living room in the Firth House at 18 Vera Street, Karori, Wellington, built for himself by Cedric Firth. Photographed by an unknown photographer 1941, PAColl-5870-2-03-1, Alexander Turnbull Library.

⁴¹ Gatley, Julia.





View of the living room in the Firth House at 18 Vera Street, Karori, Wellington, built for himself by Cedric Firth. Photographed by an unknown photographer 1941, PAColl-5870-2-03-2, Alexander Turnbull Library.



Cedric Firth in the 18 Vera Street house c1990s.⁴²

⁴² Gatley, Julia.



Chronologies and Timelines

Timeline of events, including modifications

1941	Cedric Firth purchased land from Samuel Marsden Collegiate School Trust Board.
1941	18 Vera Street house and garage built (Wellington City Council Archives B21501).
1962	Additions and alterations to house (Alexander Turnbull Library Plans-94-039-843-860). ⁴³
1965	Carport built (Wellington City Council Archives C16525).
1965	Dwelling Alterations by Firth (Wellington City Council Archives C17808).
1996	Dwelling alterations (Wellington City Council Archives 14289).
1996	Inbuilt Fireplace (Wellington City Council Archives 22191).
2005	Replace boundary fence and retaining wall, replace membrane and ply on carport roof, 3 new exterior windows and doors (Wellington City Council Archives 130561).

Occupation history

1941-1994	Cedric Harold Firth, architect
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Biographies

Cedric Harold Firth was born on 22 May 1908 in Auckland, the son of Jane Elizabeth Marie Cartmill and her husband, Wesley Hugh Bourne Firth, a building and general contractor. His father was a great influence on him, and after attending Auckland Grammar School, Cedric was apprenticed as a builder. He trained as an architect at Auckland University College, and travelled to Europe in 1931-32, visiting new housing schemes built during the depression.

On his return to New Zealand, Firth settled in Wellington. He married Olive Dalgleish Harkness on 7 January 1938. During his early years in Wellington, he gained recognition as a writer and contributed frequently to the *Standard* and to

⁴³ Firth, "Mr and Mrs Firth, 18 Vera Street, Karori, Architectural Drawings, Additions and Alterations to House, 1962."



the left-wing journal *Tomorrow*. In 1936, in response to the 1935 Housing Survey Act, Firth produced a series of articles for *Tomorrow* on the problems of working-class housing. This commentary anticipated the formation of the Department of Housing Construction and called for a European-style social housing system, characterised by low-cost, good-quality buildings, with state involvement in a national scheme. Firth's strong interest in social housing led him to join the newly formed department in 1939, which, in turn, provided him with the opportunity to advance his ideas on social housing and town planning.

Firth maintained an active interest in writing. His 1948 article on New Zealand architecture for *Studio* magazine highlighted current issues in local building design. He produced the promotional material for the State Advances Corporation of New Zealand housing display at the New Zealand Centennial Exhibition of 1939–40. The international interest generated from this exhibition and the government's housing scheme led to his publication in 1949 of *State Housing in New Zealand*.

Firth was greatly influenced by the Department of Housing Construction, and his book represented the Department's views as well as his own. In 1941 he was able to put these philosophies into practice when he built his own house at 18 Vera Street in Karori. A year later Firth produced a more refined design for his next-door neighbour, Arthur Ward, who was later general manager of the New Zealand Dairy Board. Ward's house was photographed for the 1946 *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*.

Firth had formed a loose working arrangement with immigrant architect Ernst Plischke, a fellow Housing Construction Department employee, and by 1944 they were seeking private commissions together. However, it was not until 1948, after Firth secured the commission for the New Zealand Dairy and New Zealand Meat Producer Boards' head offices, that Plischke and Firth formally established a practice. In the meantime, Firth accepted a position in New York with the United Nations in 1947 as a social affairs officer to deal with housing and town planning and worked on large-scale housing schemes for Brazil and Africa. During this time, he gained accreditation in the United States as an architect and planner. He then worked briefly in London, with well-known British architect Basil Spence, and registered with the Royal Institute of British Architects before the design work on Massey House, in Wellington's Lambton Quay forced his return to New Zealand in 1952.

By 1958 Firth had set up his own practice. Soures House (1960), the Massey House addition (1967), which repeated the details of the existing building, and his largest commission, the State Services Commission's Monro State Building in Nelson (1966), are his most notable works from this period. The Monro Building is

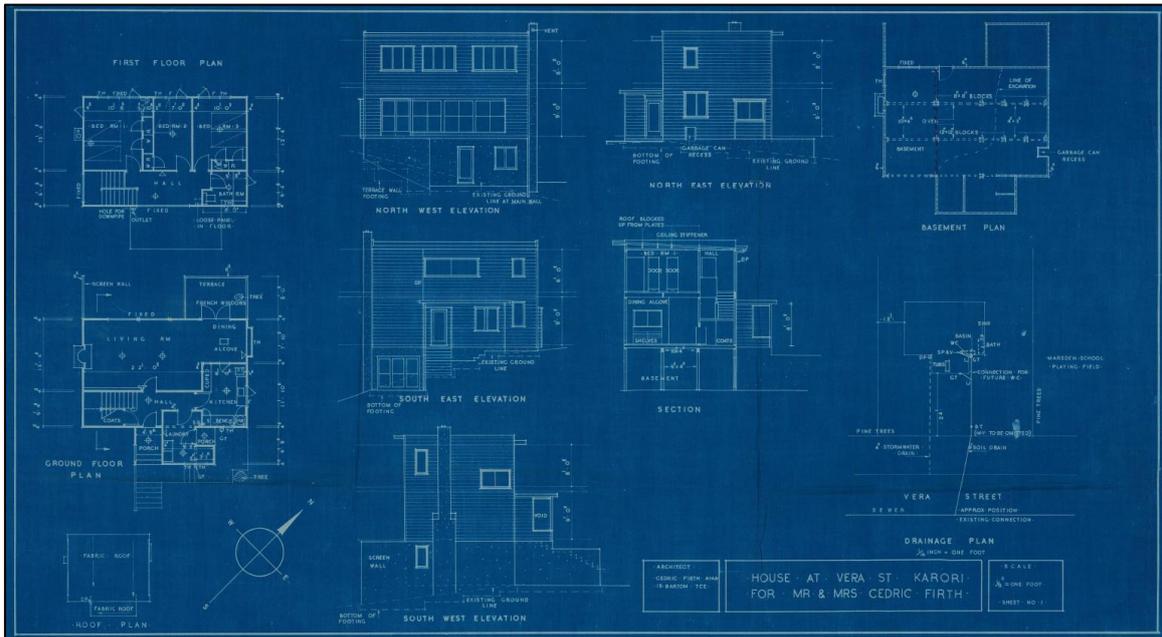


perhaps Firth's purest expression of the International Style, and clearly delineates his design rationale from that of Plischke. Comparisons can also be drawn with the memorials they designed: unlike the simple vertical slab Plischke erected to mark Abel Tasman's landfall at Golden Bay, Firth's canoe prow on the memorial to Te Rangihiroa Sir Peter Buck was a more figurative tribute to Buck's journey through life.

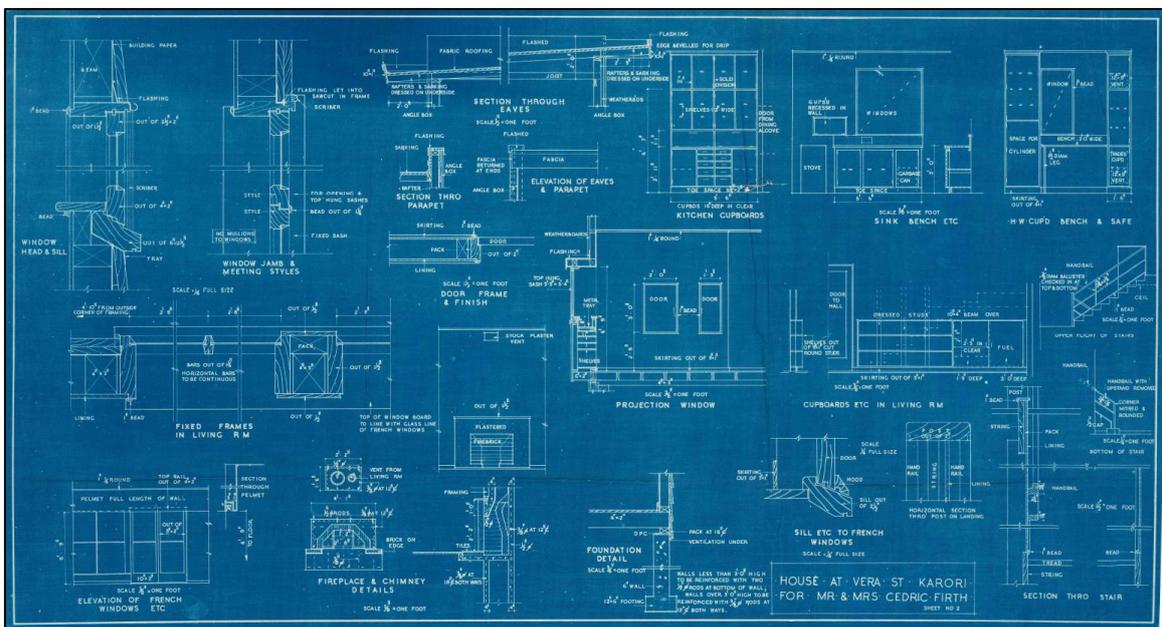
Cedric Firth eventually shifted his practice to his own home and went into retirement. His wife died in 1989, and he died on 31 May 1994 in Wellington, survived by two daughters. His brother, Raymond William Firth, had become an internationally acclaimed anthropologist. Cedric held the belief that modern design was an expression of social ideals, and he will be remembered for his design, his writing, and for his part in the establishment of modern architecture in New Zealand.



Plans and Elevations

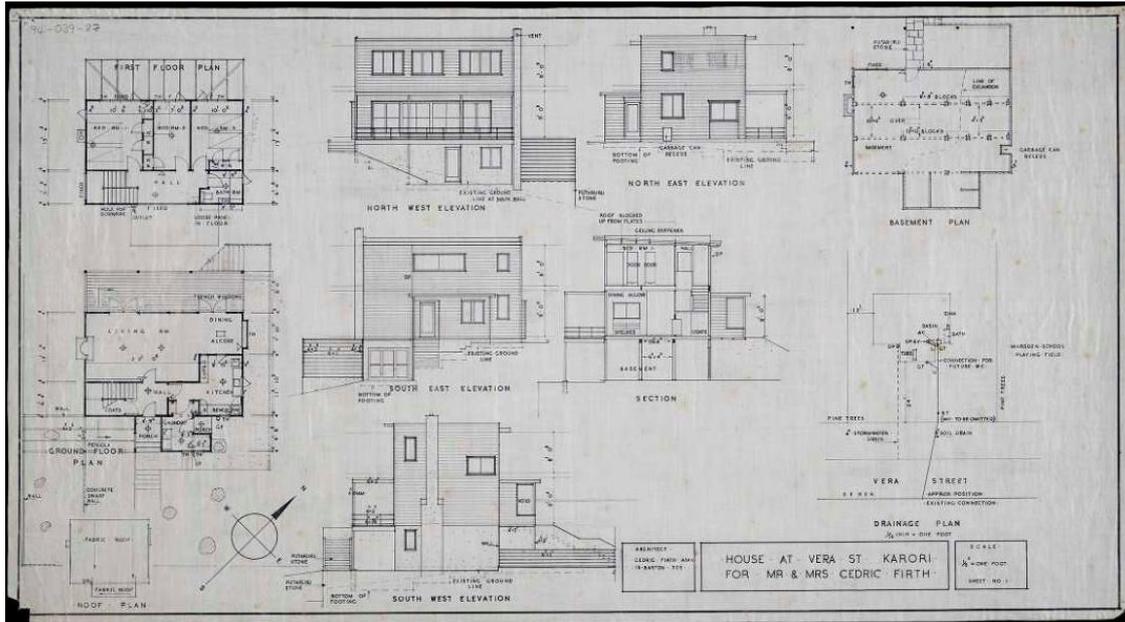


18 Vera Street Plan, B21501, Wellington City Council Archives.

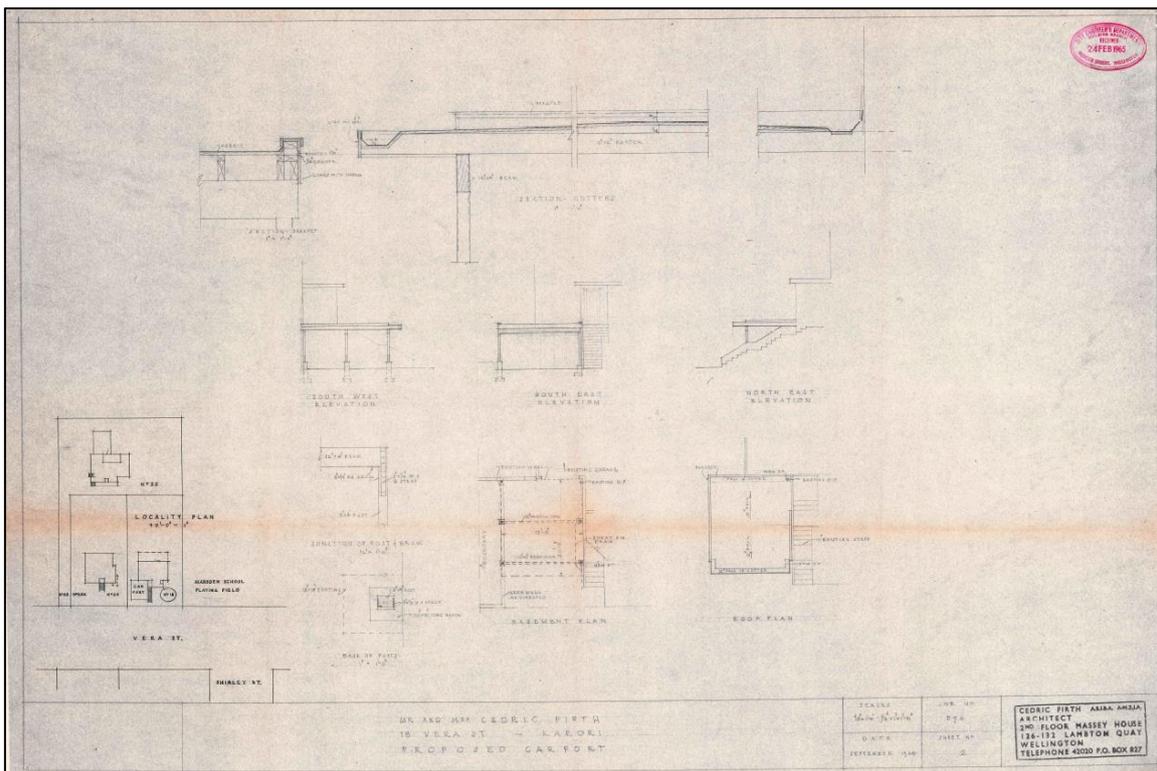


18 Vera Street Plan, B21501, Wellington City Council Archives.





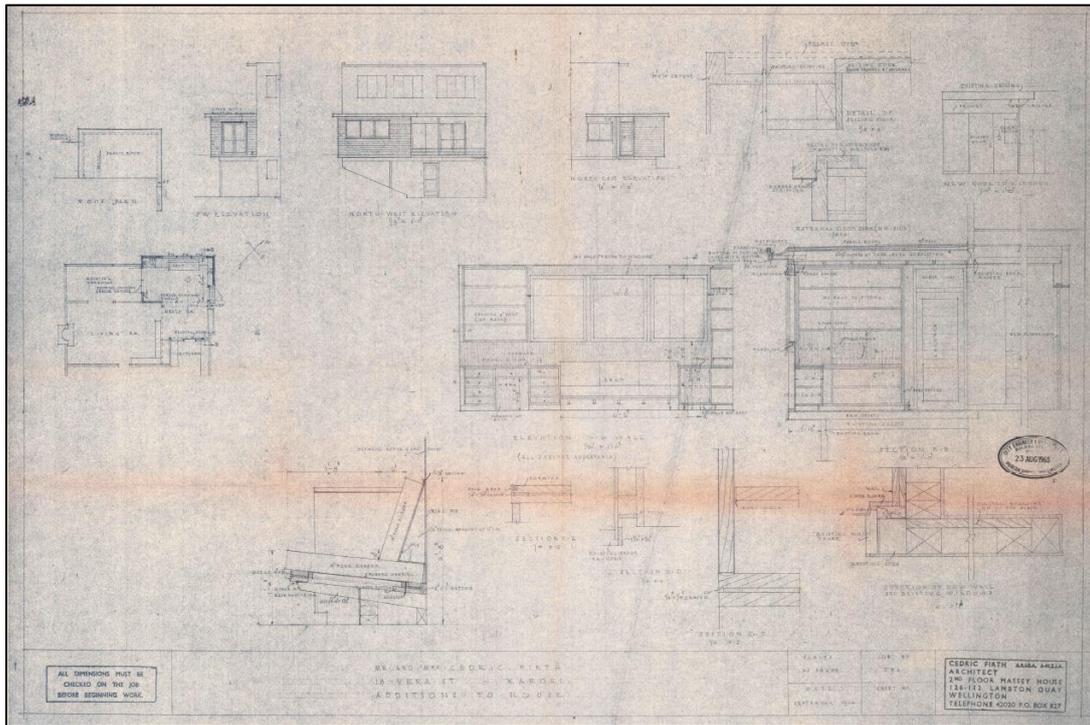
Floor plans (with slight differences from Building Permit plan submitted to Wellington City Council) from the architect's drawings for Firth House, Plans-94-039-087: Firth, Cedric Harold, 1908-1994 :[Architectural plans. ca 1930-1980], Alexander Turnbull Library.⁴⁴



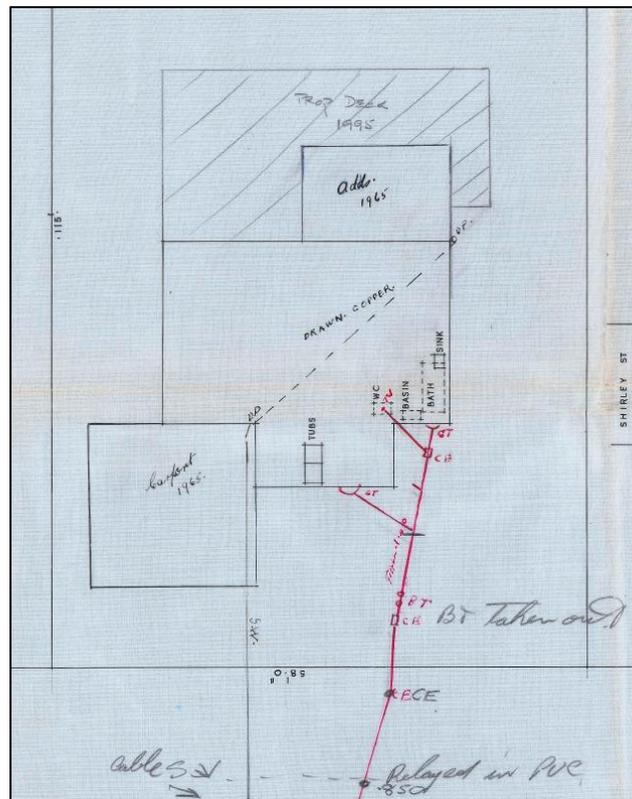
18 Vera Street Plan for Carport, 1965, C16525, Wellington City Council Archives.

⁴⁴ Firth, "Plans-94-039: Firth, Cedric Harold, 1908-1994 :[Architectural Plans. ca 1930-1980]."



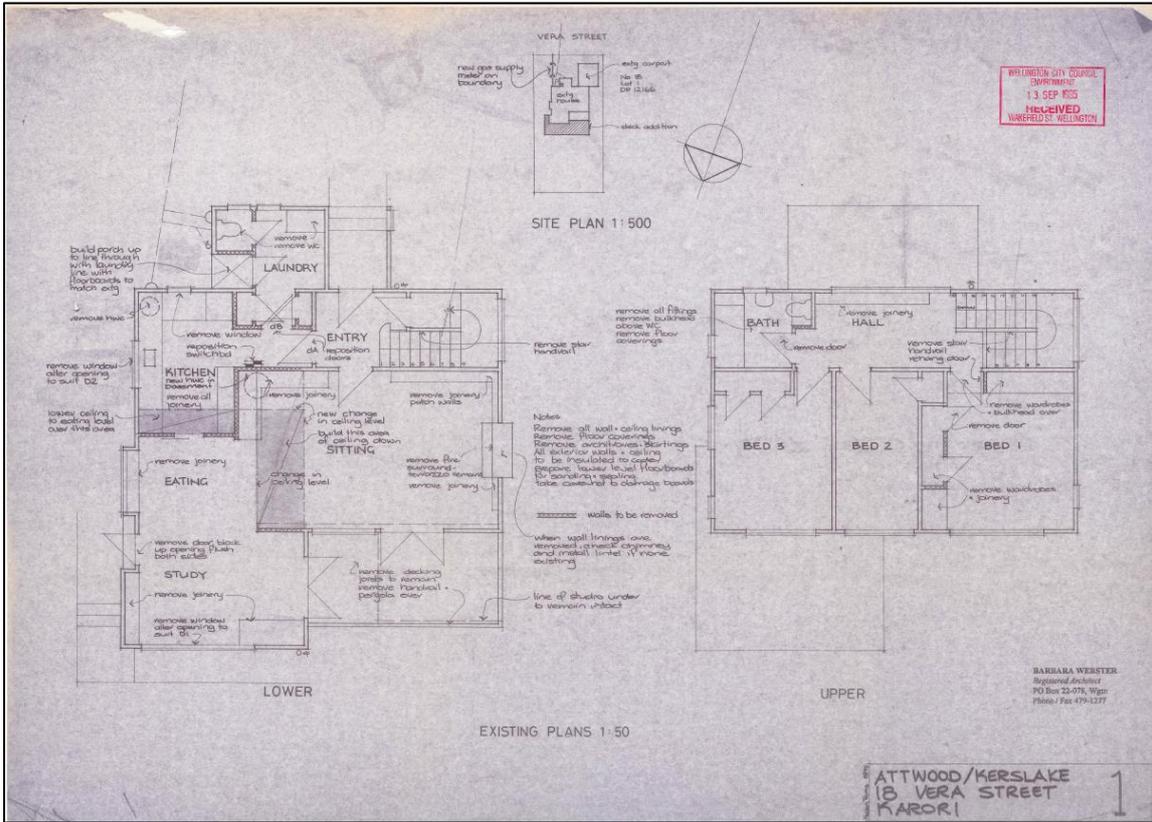


18 Vera Street Plan for additions to house, 1965, C17808, Wellington City Council Archives.

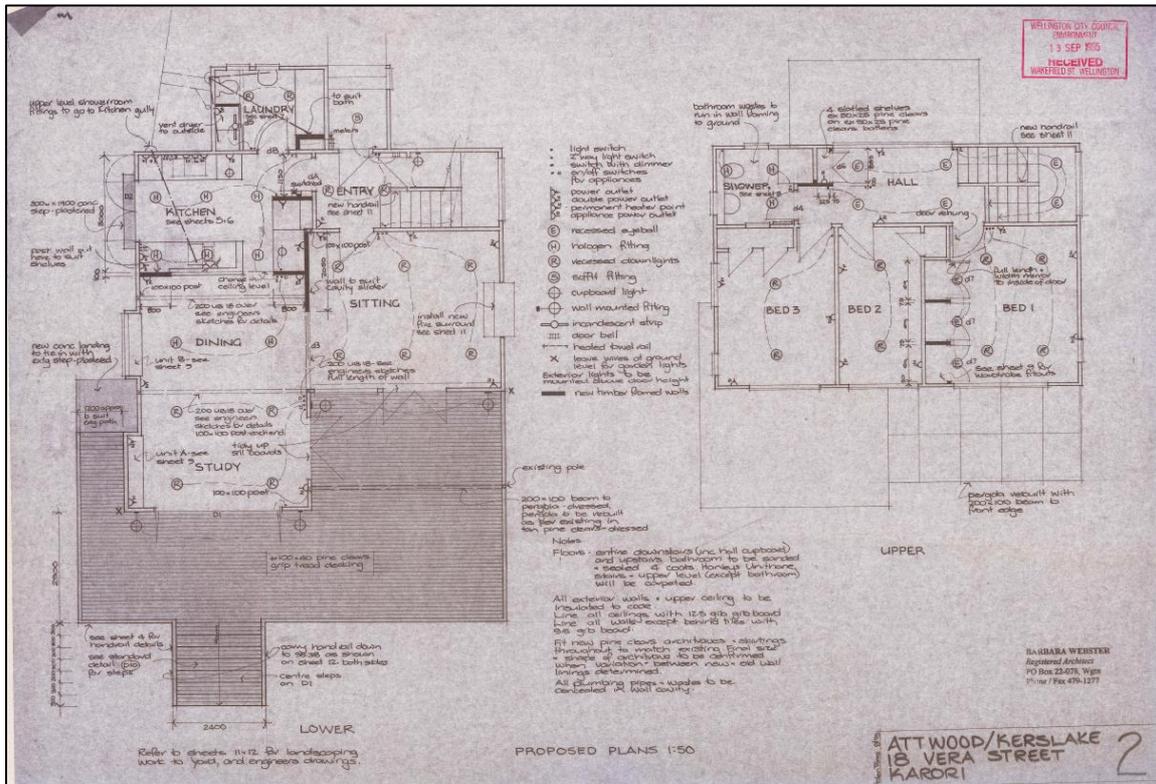


Drainage Plans showing 1965 additions and proposed 1995 alterations, 00432-45833, Wellington City Council Archives.



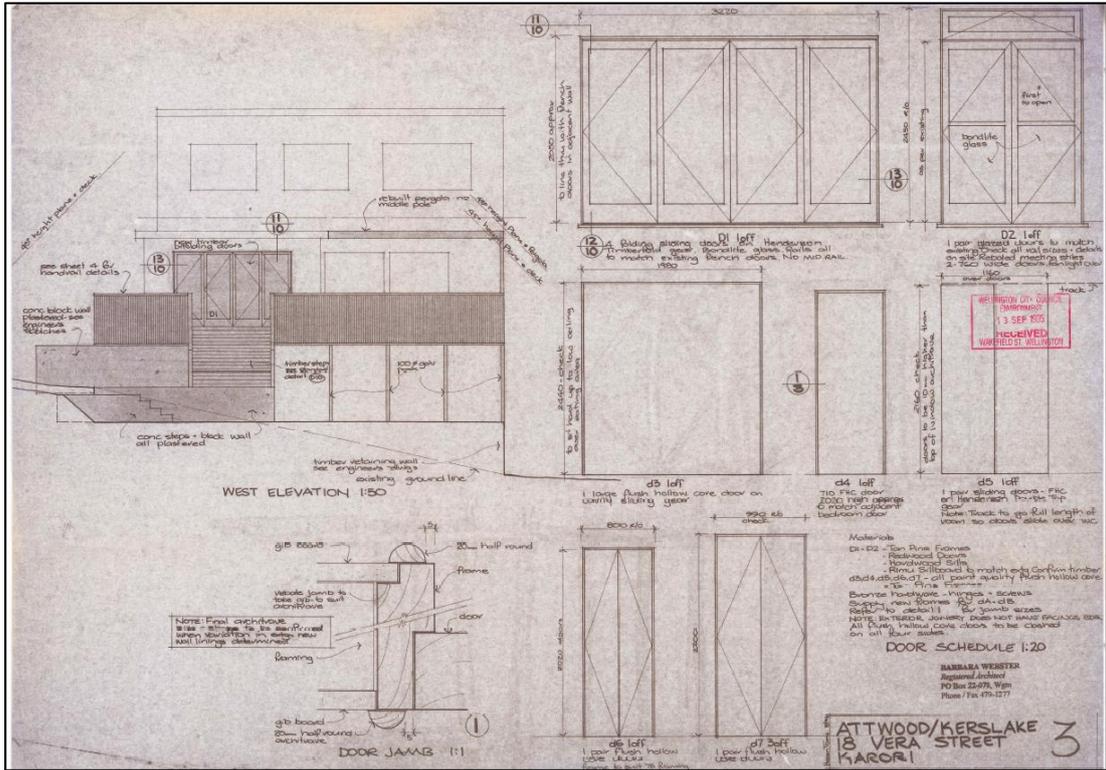


18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.

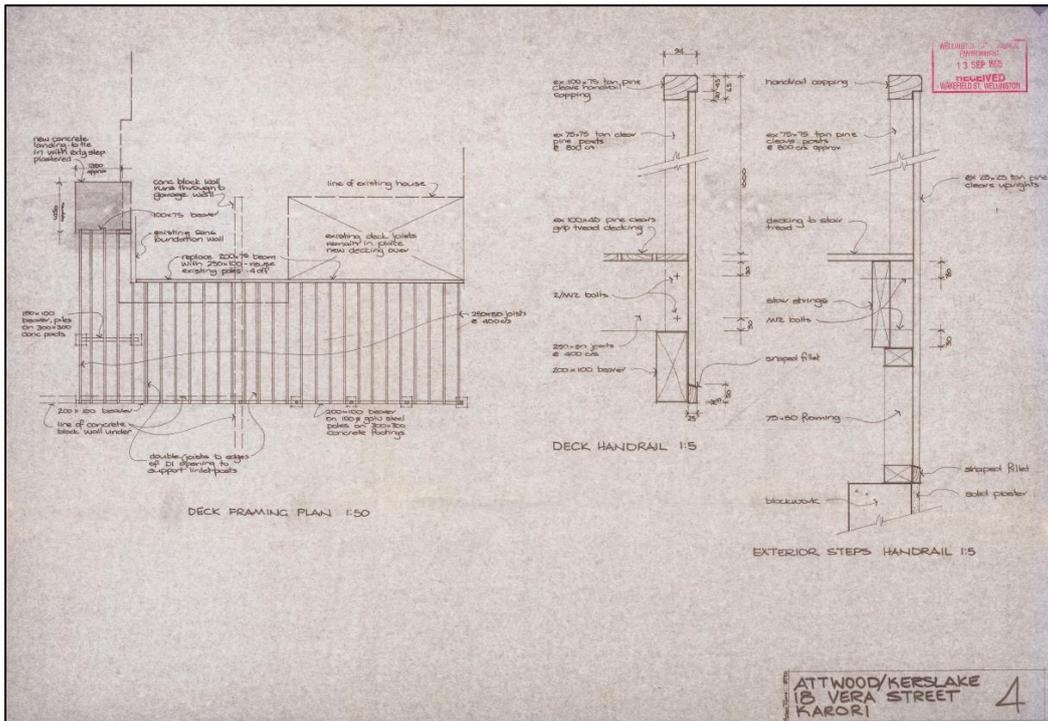


18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.



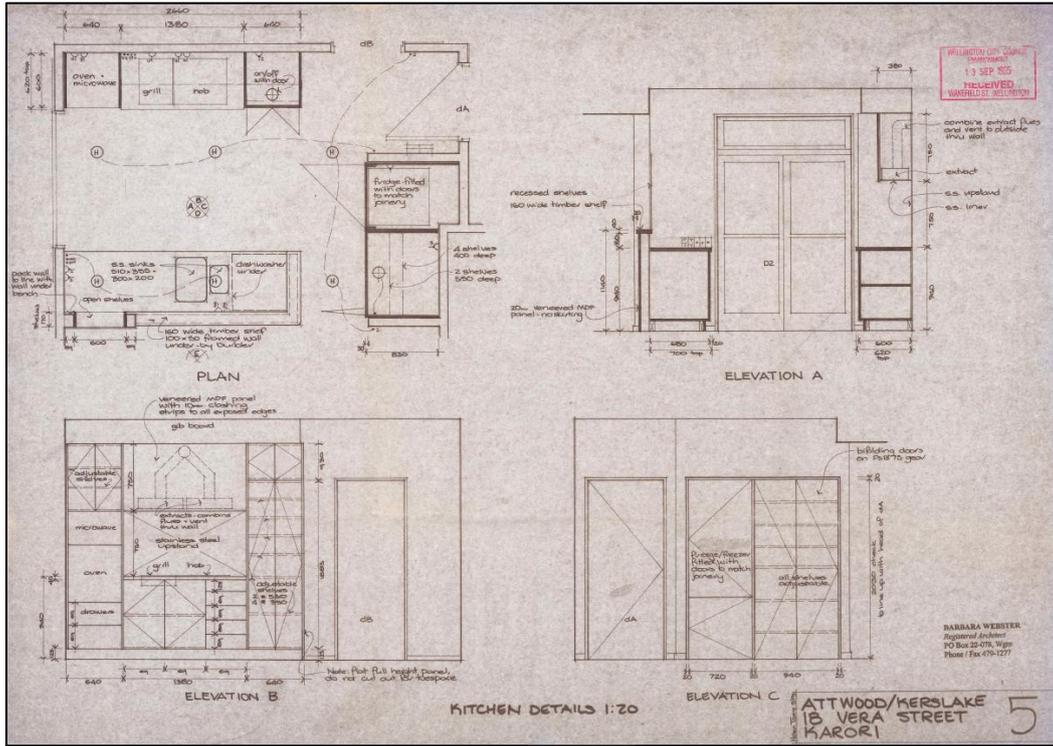


18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.

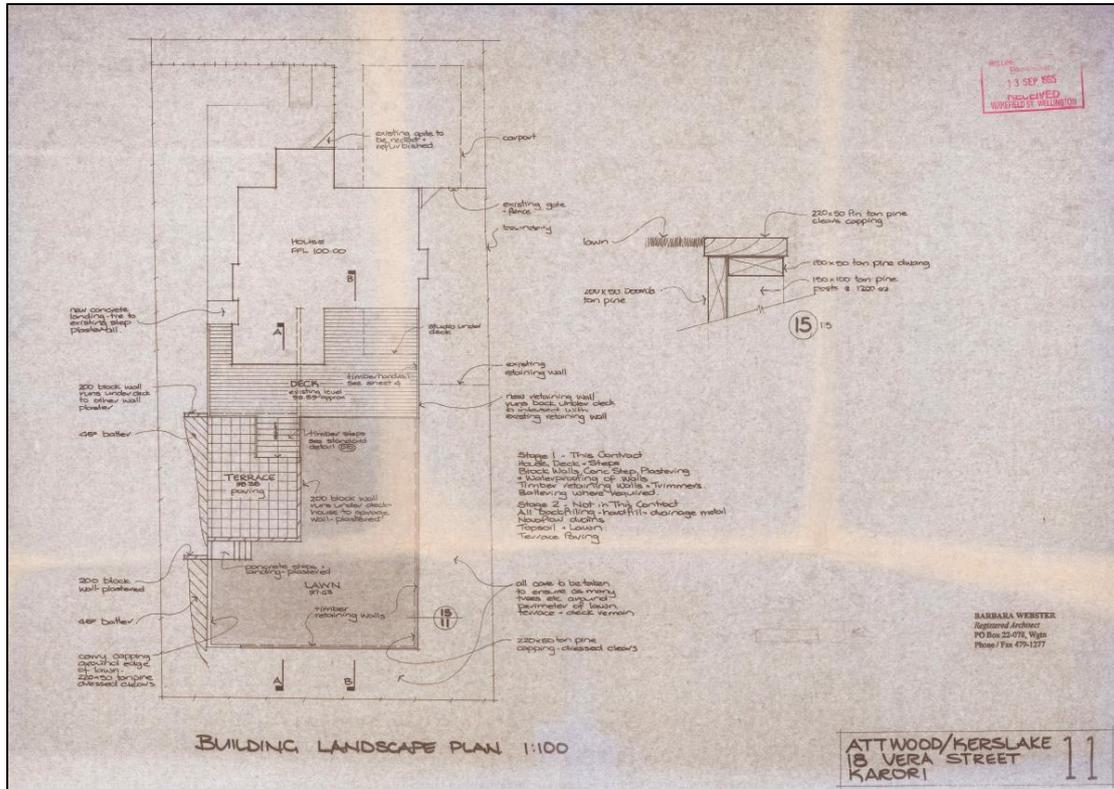


18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.



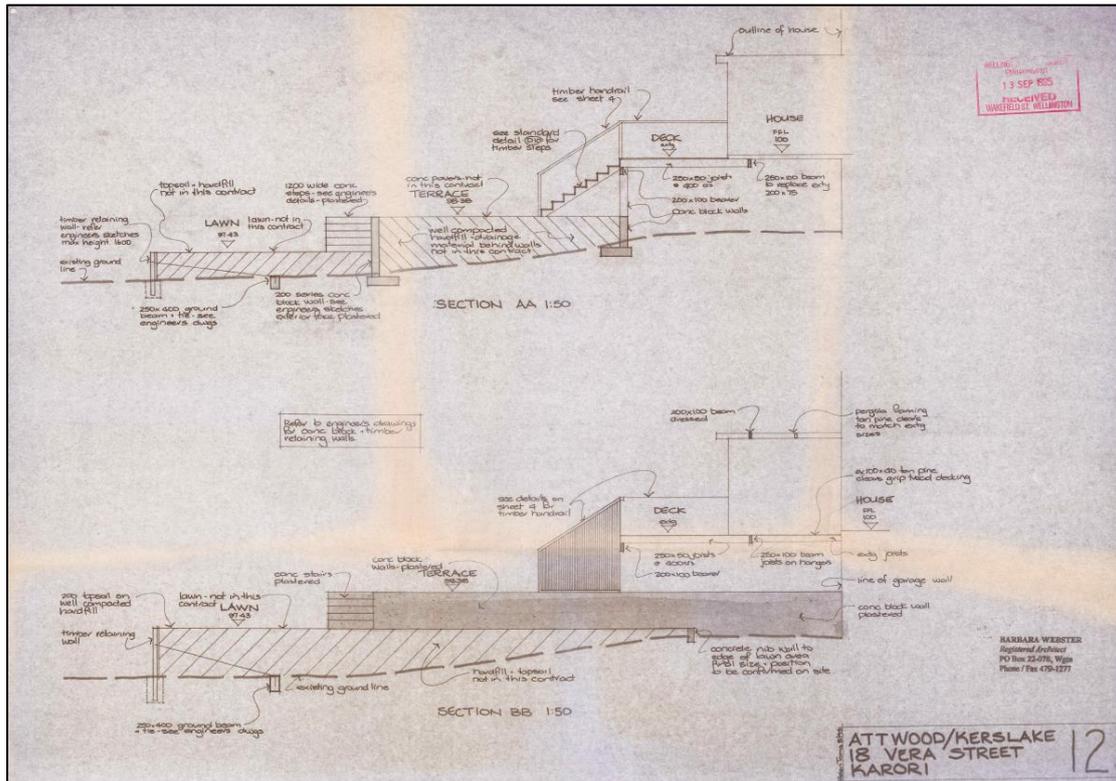


18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.



18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.





18 Vera Street Alterations, 1995, 00061-14289, Wellington City Council Archives.

Physical Description

Setting – geographical / physical context

Karori or Kaharore translates as ‘the ridge for snaring birds’, and occupies a large, elevated valley in the hills to the west of Wellington city, a well-known mahinga kai or food gathering site for Māori, with the original forest later burnt and turned into farmland by colonial settlers.

Housing two dams, Otari-Wilton’s Bush and the predator-free bird sanctuary Zealandia, Karori is known for both its expansive green spaces and expansive suburbia.

Buildings or structures



Firth House is simple in form, with the design depicting Firth's ideal state house.⁴⁵ Timber shiplap cladding, and large banks of glass windows reveal Firth's philosophy on topography and dwelling siting; believing that living spaces should be planned and arranged on site to maximise views and sun exposure for the inhabitants.⁴⁶

Firth had discussed the advantages of the 7-metre-wide house in *Tomorrow* in 1936 and had suggested that, following German precedents, even narrower houses could be explored in New Zealand.⁴⁷ Exhibiting a compactness and verticality generally associated with European Modern houses,

the two-storey Firth House has a combined living/dining room and a kitchen at the entry level and three bedrooms and a bathroom upstairs. The living/dining room runs through the length of the house, with floor to ceiling windows on the north-west ensuring sunlight. The living room is given the best aspect with maximum sun and views and was designed to avoid overlooking windows or porches. Double doors provide access to a verandah, which sits above the house's basement. The living room is long and rectangular, and with a fireplace, important for Firth, who said:

"The living room forms the centre for the social and recreational side of family life. It is the room that is used most and should be as large as possible; a rectangular shape is preferred. As central heating is not provided, the fireplace becomes the focal point for more than half the year".⁴⁸

Space was a premium in the narrow design, but Firth meticulously planned the use of in-built storage and large windows to give the building a sense of openness. The upstairs bedrooms are compact and have carefully planned in-built storage. "Space is provided to accommodate two single beds in all bedrooms. First bedrooms will take a cot as well. The heads of the bed are not located between door and windows, and all have in-built wardrobes."⁴⁹

Firth believed in intelligent site relationships and was interested in how occupants came to be within the landscape while still being sheltered from its changes.⁵⁰ The timber shiplap cladding and the large bank of glass windows to the north

⁴⁵ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

⁴⁶ Bowron.

⁴⁷ Wellington City Council, "Firth House 18 Vera Street PFG Summary Report."

⁴⁸ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

⁴⁹ Bowron.

⁵⁰ Luke, "A Blissfully Unaltered Wellington."



evoke an expansiveness suited to the New Zealand environment.⁵¹ Firth saw sunlight as essential, and Firth House was designed to be north-facing, with the kitchen located to the east to get the morning sun. Large floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room also made the most of available sunlight.⁵²

The building and environs were significantly altered under the guidance of architect Barbara Webster in 1995. Heritage architect Greg Bowron was consulted during the design phases.

The scope included:

- Upgrade entire house, rebuild walls downstairs to form separate sitting room, study, dining and kitchen area, separate laundry and bathroom.
- Completely upgrade existing upstairs bathroom to form shower room and linen cupboard.
- Gibraltar board line all walls and ceilings
- Rewire entire house
- New shower room/laundry and kitchen all to new HWC and existing drainage
- New gas supply
- New deck and pergola
- New terrace and lawn
- New joinery in study/dining
- New staircase dividing wall
- New wardrobes in main bedroom
- New linen cupboard in hall
- All interior walls plastered and painted
- Downstairs floor level to have floorboards sanded and sealed.

Further redesign and construction was undertaken in 2005 under the direction of architect Stuart Gardyne and involved replacing a boundary fence and retaining wall, replacing the membrane and ply on the carport roof, and installing three new exterior windows and doors. The original footprint of the house has been added to with the carport and addition (designed by Firth himself) and later with a larger deck at the back of the house and a terraced garden at the street front. These two redesigns were not restorations, and the house was significantly modernised and altered, with many original interior features no longer existing.⁵³

⁵¹ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

⁵² Bowron.

⁵³ Attwood, "Correspondence Re Heritage Status 18 Vera Street."



Materials

- Timber – Matai, Totara, Rimu
- Reinforced concrete foundations.

Archaeological sites

N/A

Setting – surroundings / site description

The setting is integral to Firth's design. Firth House was designed to merge with the Karori bush setting, to sit high on the hill and make the most of panoramic views and sunlight. Firth House was designed to be north-facing with large floor to ceiling windows in the living room and the east-facing kitchen positioned for the morning sun. 22 Vera Street, Ward House, also designed by Firth in 1942 is down a driveway behind 18 Vera Street. Although close to its neighbours and bordered on one side by a school, the property with its north-facing deck is private.

HNZPT Extent of List Entry

N/A

Comparative Analysis Summary

Neighbouring Ward House at 22 Vera Street was designed by Firth in 1942 after completion of his own house at 18 Vera Street. This is a similar but more refined design than Firth House and was for Arthur Ward, later, general manager of the New Zealand Dairy Board.⁵⁴ Ward's house was photographed for the 1946 *Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand*. The exterior tongue-and-groove timber of Ward House was detailed to create a smooth surface as free as possible from texture, and to resemble plaster surfaces of 1920s Europe,⁵⁵ differing from Firth House's weatherboard exterior. In 1952 and 1959, Firth was further employed to make alterations to the two-storey Ward House, then in 1972, designed the conversion of Ward House into two flats.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Bowron, "Firth, Cedric Harold."

⁵⁵ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

⁵⁶ "22 Vera Street, Convert to 2 Flats C36802."



Lang House was built in 1952 by Austrian architect Ernst Plischke, a key figure of the introduction of the Modernist architectural style to Wellington following World War II.⁵⁷ One of Plischke's best known designs, the Lang House, also in Karori's a significant piece of post-war New Zealand Modernist architecture. It has group value with other Modernist houses of the era in New Zealand, all of which reflect the solid establishment and development of the Modernist design movement in New Zealand.⁵⁸ Lang House has retained a high level of integrity, with later fabric, additions, and garden remaining aligned with the original construction.

McKenzie House at 270 Cockayne Road, Ngaio, is another residence designed by Firth, for Ian and Gladys McKenzie in 1958 when Firth was in partnership with Ernst Plischke. Today it remains unaltered and unmodified. This house is designed as a 'box on box' over three floors, at double height, and has a sky-lit entrance atrium with an indoor garden, floor to ceiling glass, steel window joinery, and extensive built-in furniture.⁵⁹ Although Firth was in partnership with Plischke when this house was designed, it is attributed to Firth alone.

Evaluation Criteria

A. Historic values: these relate to the history of a place and how it demonstrates important historical themes, events, people or experiences.

(i) Themes: the place is associated with important themes in history or patterns of development.

Firth House is a highly **influential** and **significant** example of the Modernist style **nationally** and was designed by one of New Zealand's prominent modernist architects who was also influential in the development of national social housing. Firth House is associated with post-WWII suburban housing development. Firth used his philosophies on state housing and modernism to shape Government policies while he worked at the Department of Housing Construction from 1939 to 1949.

⁵⁷ Tyler, "Plischke, Ernst Anton."

⁵⁸ "Lang House and Garage."

⁵⁹ Luke, "A Blissfully Unaltered Wellington."



(ii) Events: the place has an association with an important event or events in local, regional or national history.

N/A

(iii) People: the place is associated with the life or works of an individual, group or organisation that has made a significant contribution to the district, region or nation

Cedric Firth designed Firth House for himself based on his philosophies of Modernist construction design and as the potential epitome of New Zealand state housing. He had a strong social concern for accessible, standardised and good quality public housing, to be realised through urban planning on modern lines, and influenced Government policies on these matters. He was passionate about promoting the International Style in New Zealand architecture, introducing New Zealand to this style and demonstrating how it could work within the New Zealand context. Firth House has significant historic values at a national level for its association with Cedric Firth.

(iv) Social: the place is associated with everyday experiences from the past and contributes to our understanding of the culture and life of the district, region or nation.

Firth House is associated with new everyday post-war way to live, think and work, which is demonstrated by this new style of architecture.

B. Physical values: these values relate to the physical evidence present.

(i) Archaeological: there is potential for archaeological investigation to contribute new or important information about the human history of the district, region or nation.

N/A

(ii) Architectural: the place is notable for its style, design, form, scale, materials, ornamentation, period, craftsmanship or other architectural values



Firth House is **notable** for its form and style, with two storeys on a basement exhibiting a compactness and verticality generally associated with European Modern houses. Firth House is a highly **influential example** of modernist architecture reflected by Firth himself in adjacent properties and other period structures, and as a formative example of future two-storeyed state housing design. One of the earliest Modernist houses in Wellington and New Zealand, Firth House has architectural significance at a regional and national level.

(iii) Townscape: the place is strongly associated with other natural or cultural features in the landscape or townscape, and/or contributes to the heritage values of a wider townscape or landscape setting, and/or it is a landmark.

N/A

(iv) Groups: The place is part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use.

Neighbouring Ward House at 22 Vera Street, was designed by Firth a year after he built his own home. When considered together, these houses have **some** group value, **locally**. Firth House and Ward House are amongst a number of other significant Modernist houses in Karori.

(v) Surroundings: the setting or context of the place contributes to an appreciation and understanding of its character, history and/or development.

The architecture of Firth House is a Modernist response to the topography and landscape, as well as the surrounding bush. The house was designed to merge with the bush setting, to sit high on the hill and make the most of panoramic views and sunlight. Firth saw sunlight as essential, and Firth House was north-facing with large floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room to maximise exposure to the elements, and the kitchen located to the east to get the morning sun.

(vi) Scientific: The area or place has the potential to provide scientific information about the history of the district or region

N/A



(vii) Technological: the place provides evidence of the history of technological development; and/or demonstrates innovation or important methods of construction or design; and/or contains unusual construction materials.

Firth House demonstrates innovation of design in bringing Modernist and International architectural styles to New Zealand. Designing houses and state houses in these new styles created a New Zealand-modernist vernacular.

(viii) Integrity: the significant physical values of the place have been largely unmodified. This includes the retention of important modifications and/or additions from later periods.

The interior of Firth House has been extensively altered in the last twenty years. From the desktop study of the building permit plans it appears that there have been few major changes to the exterior (addition under Firth in 1965 and deck extended in 1995). The exterior of Firth House contains a high degree of integrity and is largely unmodified. The interior has been substantially modified and **little** of the interior remains intact. Firth House has **some** integrity value in its form and fabric, and the house has a strong association with Firth, who designed and lived in the house for his professional life.

(ix) Age: the place is particularly old in the context of human occupation of the Wellington region.

N/A

C. Social values: these values relate to the meanings that a place has for a particular community or communities.

(i) Sentiment: the place has strong or special associations with a particular cultural group or community for spiritual, political, social, religious, ethnic, national, symbolic or commemorative reasons.

N/A



(ii)	<i>Recognition: the place is held in high public esteem for its historic heritage values, or its contribution to the sense of identity of a community, to the extent that if it was damaged or destroyed it would cause a sense of loss.</i>
	Firth House was awarded second place in the A sections for a 1943 House Building Competition.
(iii)	<i>Sense of place/ continuity: the place provides evidence of cultural or historical continuity, or contributes to a sense of place for a community</i>
N/A	
	<i>D. Tangata whenua values: the place is sacred or important to Māori for spiritual, cultural or historical reasons.</i>
N/A	
	<i>E. Rarity: the place is unique or rare within the district or region.</i>
N/A	
	<i>F. Representativeness: the place is a good example of its type, era or class it represents.</i>
	Firth House is considered to have some representative value as a relatively early example of a Modernist house designed as the ideal solution to social housing. Accordingly, it is an influential example of a house to be built in the Modernist style in New Zealand, however, there are other more intact examples in the region.

Recommendations

Firth House has **significant** historic and social heritage values which contribute to our understanding of the development of Modernism in a **national** context. The house is a highly **influential example** of an architecturally designed Modernist house and was at the forefront of development in the **regional** and **national** contexts. The house is a **representative** and highly **influential example** of an architecturally designed, relatively early Modernist dwelling and one influencing national state house design philosophy in the ensuing years.



It is recommended for addition to the District Plan Schedule of Historic Heritage Building and should encompass 18 Vera's Street exterior form, scale, and materials.

Other recommendations

It is recommended that Ward House at 22 Vera Street, be considered for inclusion on the District Plan as a more refined and authentic example of Cedric Firth's work. Later alterations were also designed by Firth. Ward House and Firth House form an excellent representative group showcasing the architectural skill and philosophies of the noted architect.

Heritage Assessment Criteria

This building has been assessed against the Evaluation Criteria and found to be significant in the following heritage values: A,B, F

A: Historic values	Significant
(i) Themes	Y
(ii) Events	
(iii) People	Y
(iv) Social	Y
B: Physical values	Significant
(i) Archaeological	
(ii) Architectural	Y
(iii) Townscape	Y
(iv) Group	Y
(v) Surroundings	Y
(vi) Scientific	
(vii) Technological	Y
(viii) Integrity	
(ix) Age	
C: Social values	
(i) Sentiment	
(ii) Recognition	
(iii) Sense of place	
D: Tangata whenua values	
E: Rarity	
F: Representativeness	Significant



Extent of the Place

The extent of place includes the land described as Lot 1, DP 12166, Wellington Land District, and the building known Firth House at 18 Vera Street thereon. It should encompass the building's exterior form, scale, and materials.

Non-heritage fabric / exclusions

Later, post-1965 additions and modifications should be excluded from the extent.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Comparative analysis

Appendix 2 Wellington Thematic Heritage Study 2013

Appendix 3 Records(s) of title, Deeds register and Gazette notice information



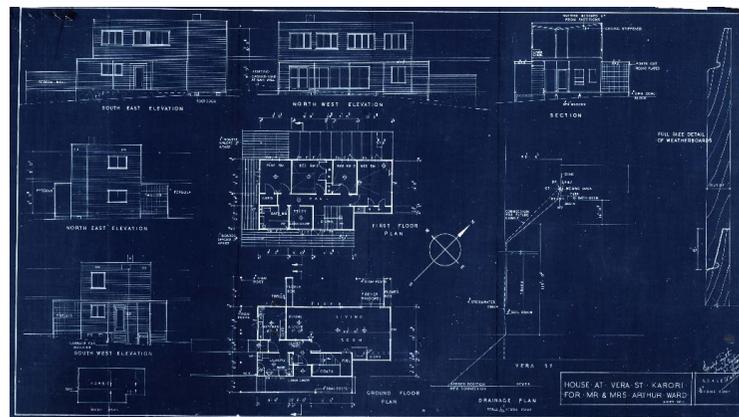
Appendix 1 Comparative analysis

[state the basis of comparison]				
Place name	Address/ location/ NZTM	Heritage Listing or recognition of significance	Photographs	Analysis
Ward House	22 Vera Street		 <p><i>Ward House, Vera Street.⁶⁰</i></p>	<p>Cedric Firth produced a very similar but more refined design of Firth House for his next-door neighbour, Arthur Ward. The exterior tongue and groove timber was more detailed than 18 Vera Street and Firth created a smooth surface as free as possible from texture to resemble plaster surfaces of 1920s Europe.⁶² Ward's house was photographed for the 1946</p>

⁶⁰ Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

⁶² Bowron, "Simplified and Scientific - The Firth House."

Year Book of the Arts in New Zealand.



22 Vera Street plans, 1941, B21932, Wellington City Council Archives.⁶¹

⁶¹ "22 Vera Street Plans."

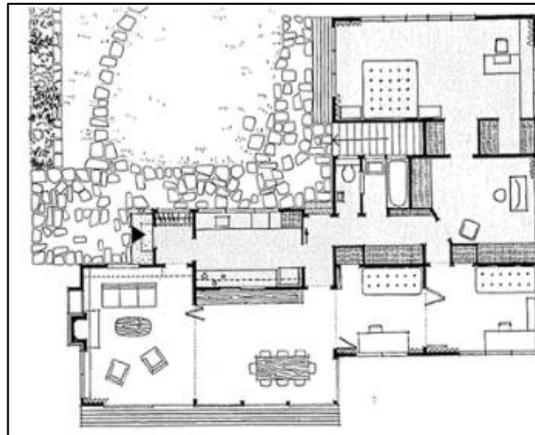


<p>Lang House, Karori, Wellington</p>	<p>81 Hatton Street, Karori, Wellington</p>	<p>WCC District Scheme 434</p>	 <p><i>Exterior of the house designed by Plischke for Henry George Lang.⁶³</i></p>	<p>Lang House was built in 1952 by Austrian architect, Ernst Anton Plischke, who was a key figure in the introduction of modernism into Wellington architecture in the period following World War II.⁶⁵ The Lang House is also a significant piece of post-war Modernist architecture in New Zealand.</p> <p>The house is an important representative example of the “mid-century” Modernist school of design in New Zealand.</p> <p>Lang House differs from Firth House as the house has retained a high level of authenticity in the fabric, later additions, and garden, whereas Firth House has</p>
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⁶³ Ashton, “House Designed by E A Plischke for H G Lang, Hatton Street, Karori, Wellington.”

⁶⁵ Tyler, “Plischke, Ernst Anton.”





been significantly altered in the last 20 years.



			 <p data-bbox="1144 517 1413 544"><i>Images of Lang House.⁶⁴</i></p>	
<p data-bbox="271 644 421 804">McKenzie House, Ngaio, Wellington</p>	<p data-bbox="450 644 636 804">270 Cockayne Road, Ngaio, Wellington.</p>		 <p data-bbox="1081 1145 1480 1173"><i>Interior of McKenzie House c1950s.⁶⁶</i></p>	<p data-bbox="1682 639 2096 1182">Designed for Ian and Gladys McKenzie in 1958 by Cedric Firth (when he was in partnership with Ernst Plischke). This house is unaltered and unmodified from its time of build while Firth house has been. The design is box on box over three floors, a double height, sky lit entry atrium with an indoor garden, floor to ceiling glass, stell window joinery,</p>

⁶⁴ "Lang House."



				<p>built in furniture.⁶⁷ Cedric Firth was in partnership with Ernst Plischke from 1948-1958, but this house is attributed to Firth alone. This differs from Firth House as it is still in a high level of authenticity, whereas Firth house has been significantly altered over the last twenty years.</p>
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⁶⁶ Luke, "A Blissfully Unaltered Wellington."

⁶⁷ Luke.



Appendix 2 Wellington Thematic Heritage Study 2013

Refer to the Wellington Thematic Heritage Study 2013

<https://wellington.govt.nz/~media/services/community-and-culture/heritage/files/thematic-heritage-study.pdf>

Select the themes & subthemes which apply to the place		Yes / some
A2.4	Post WWII flight to outer suburbs and changing desirability of inner-city suburbs	
A2.4B	Housing development	Yes, vastly influential movement of Modernism came to New Zealand via the influx of European immigrants around the time of the World War II, and it quickly found support among New Zealand architects, designers, and craftspeople.
A2.4C	State Housing	Firth used his philosophies on state housing and modernism and shaped Government policies while he worked at the Department of Housing Construction from 1939 to 1949.

Appendix 3 Records(s) of title

NEW ZEALAND.



Register-book,
Vol. 408, folio 283
408/283

Reference: Vol. 285, Folio 193
Transfer No. Vol. 341, Folio 210
Application No.
Order for N/C No. 5196.

(Land and Deeds)
OFFICE OF THE LAND REGISTRAR
(Form B)
REVISED 1925

CERTIFICATE OF TITLE UNDER LAND TRANSFER ACT.

This Certificate, dated the _____ twentieth _____ day of September _____ one thousand nine hundred and _____ twenty _____ nine, under the hand and seal of the District Land Registrar of the Land Registration District of _____ WELLINGTON _____ witnesses that _____ THE SAMUEL MARSDEN COLLEGIATE SCHOOL TRUST BOARD _____

is seized of an estate in fee-simple (subject to such reservations, restrictions, encumbrances, liens, and interests as are notified by memorial under written or endorsed hereon, subject also to any existing right of the Crown to take and lay off roads under the provisions of any Act of the General Assembly of New Zealand) in the land hereinafter described, as the same is delineated by the plan hereon bordered _____ green _____, to the several dimensions a little more or less, that is to say: All that parcel of land containing _____ ONE ACRE, THREE SQUARE FEET, AND SEVEN SQUARE INCHES, more or less, situate in the City of Wellington being part of Section 34 of the Karori District part of the said land being also Lots 143 and 144 on Deposited Plan No. 410



W. G. Davis
Assistant District Land Registrar.

Mortgage No. 200078 The Samuel Marsden Collegiate School Trust Board to The Bank of New Zealand produced 20th September 1929 at 12.1 p.m. *W. G. Davis*

As Witness:

Mortgage 210439 The Samuel Marsden Collegiate School Trust Board to Bank of New Zealand produced 20th September 1929 at 2.40 p.m. H. Wood

Increase of mortgage 200078 produced 32nd October 1931 at 11.50 a.m. H. Wood

X haveat 12296 against Mortgage 210439 by Thomas William McQuinn produced 25th August 1931 at 11.30 a.m. W. G. Davis

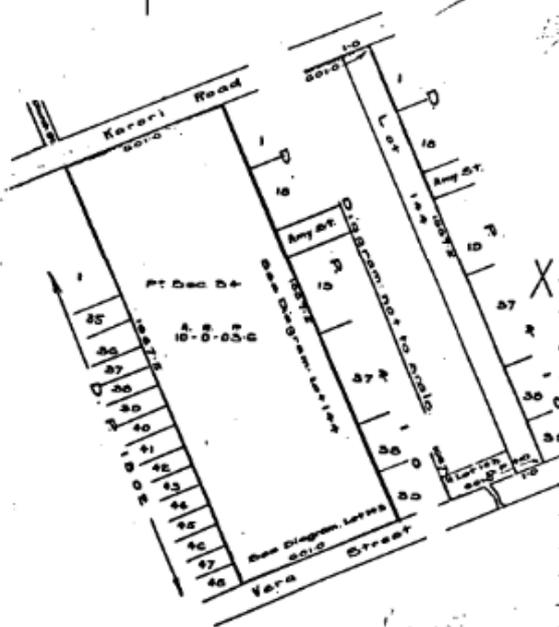
Re 21483 Order of the Court of Chancery charging mortgage 210439 produced 20th November 1938 at 3 for H. Wood

Discharge of Mortgage 210439 as to Lots 1, 2, 3 plan 12166 produced P. G. French 19th 11. 5 am. H. Wood

Discharge of Mortgage 200078 as to Lots 1, 2, 3 plan 12166 produced P. G. French 1941 at 11. 5 am. H. Wood

CONTINUED

Plan 12166
5/11/40



Scale: 3 chains to an inch.



408/283

Transfer 257468 of Lot 1 plan 12166
 to Samuel Marsden Collegiate School,
 Trust Board to Cedric Hamilton Esq
 produced P.H. Marsh 19/12/06 10.30 am
 Vol 157 Feb 1907

Transfer 257470 of Lot 3 plan 12166
 to Samuel Marsden Collegiate School
 Trust Board to Arthur Hugh Esq
 produced P.H. Marsh 19/12/06 10.30 am
 Vol 157 Feb 1907

Transfer 260008 of Lot 2 plan 12166
 to Samuel Marsden Collegiate School
 Trust Board to H.L. John Esq
 produced 27 August 1911 at 4.30 pm
 Vol 157 Feb 1907

Transfer 260009 of Lot 2 plan 12166
 to Samuel Marsden Collegiate School
 Trust Board to H.L. John Esq
 produced 27 August 1911 at 4.30 pm
 Vol 157 Feb 1907

H.L. John Esq
 N.C.O. 18702 } cancelled as to Balance
 1.9.03 } also Vol 157 page 23239
 Karadine Esq

