

**Opoutere Trust 003 and Ian Attwood 079  
Hearing Stream 3 – 9am 11 May 2023**

**Chair:** Trevor Robinson

**Commissioners:** Heike Lutz, David McMahon, Rawiri Faulkner

**Introduction**

If a visitor visited the Firth House in 2023 because of the Council's heritage scheduling, they could conceivably believe that Firth was an architectural visionary, 50-years ahead of his time. That would be an inaccurate assessment and a significant misinterpretation.

The house (as it now stands) no longer accurately presents Firth's original design and fidelity to what he built in 1941.

The house was substantially extended and altered in 1965, in 1995 and again in 2005. Whilst the original exterior fabric may be discerned, there have been major changes in the functional spaces especially the living spaces or orientation and focus of the kitchen, the location of entranceways and doors, joinery, the deck, and the environs.

The Firth House was not built 'as the ideal solution to social housing' – it was designed as a private home. If Firth is recognised for his public or social housing, then Council should list and protect those examples of his work. To state it (the house) is 'relatively unchanged' (Statement of Evidence, Moira Smith April 2023) without undertaking a site visit and assessing the interior changes is disappointing and falls beneath my expectations of professional heritage assessment standards.

**Notes for Commissioners**

**1. Reduction in capital value**

I have, with others, presented evidence that scheduling in the District Plan will see a reduction in our houses' capital values and the prospective purchasers pool due to development constraints. My house's association with Firth before 1994 is not disputed. But to now propose, almost thirty years later, to retrospectively impose development constraints on owners seeking to modernise and adapt their (already altered) homes, together with the anticipated reduction in capital value, is unacceptable to the owners and demonstrates a lack of understanding and appreciation of societal changes and the impacts of Council's retrospective decisions on private housing and personal property.

**2. The myth of the merit of the German 20-foot width**

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.' He was referring to public or social housing.

In his lifetime Firth seemed to abandon this spatial commitment and extended his own house significantly. The living spaces appear to have been too small for his family even in his day. The house today remains too small for a contemporary family home seeking modern amenities.

### 3. History

I purchased the Firth House from his family in 1994. The house was bordering on being derelict and had multiple construction and material issues. I undertook an extensive ground-up redesign in 1995. The plan was to create a contemporary, fit-for-purpose home; it was **not** an exercise to preserve architectural heritage and retain or recreate Firth's original design and detailing.

### 4. Engagement Timeline

27 November 2020. First letter from Liam Hodgetts, WCC, advising of the potential inclusion in the District Plan. "We'd be happy to come and have a look and a chat."

7 December 2020. Ian Attwood to Liam Hodgetts: "You are welcome to visit the house and discuss our respective views on the 'heritage value'." No response was received. Absence of engagement and dialogue from the outset.

17 June 2022. Receipt of the 48-page Historic Heritage Evaluation, a desktop study prepared in Dunedin. No site visit was undertaken, and 'the interiors were not reviewed'.

1 May 2023. There has still not been one site visit, other than a heritage specialist 'standing on the street'. Is this how Council believe heritage values are best evaluated, preserved, and negotiated?

### 5. District Plan constraints

Under the District Plan no future changes or development are now possible. The significant and substantial changes made in 1965 and 1995 and 2005 would **not now** be permitted. Council knowingly acknowledges, accepts, and is choosing to ignore the significant changes made almost thirty years ago and seems determined to protect and 'lock-up' what was created in 1995 and not 1941. The house is no longer original or authentic.

### 6. *Long Live the Modern*

In 2008, author Julia Gatley (*Long Live the Modern*) wrote to the present owner to request permission to photograph the house. "I am editing a book on modern architecture in New Zealand. The aim is to find the key **buildings that still maintain their design integrity and have not been compromised by additions and alterations over time.**" Tellingly Gatley chose only to show in print archival pictures of the original interior from Firth's time (and by 2008 then much altered and quite different), and one exterior view that did not illustrate the extent of the design changes. In other words, illustrating what existed in 2008, would have shown a building 'compromised by additions and alterations over time'.

### 7. *The Firth House in Zeal and Crusade* – edited by John Wilson c1996.

The essay on the Firth House in *Zeal and Crusade* was written by heritage advisor the late Greg Bowron. In the essay he writes of and about the house at the time it was built in 1941. He was **not writing about** what existed in 1996. Regrettably several commentators, including the Statement of Evidence prepared by Moira Smith, Conservation Architect and Heritage Advisor, quote the Bowron essay: "And so, my assessment under B(ii) architectural values is that Firth House has **significant architectural values** and is **notable** as a pivotal example of a Modernist house. The place illustrates Cedric Firth's writing, and demonstrates the innovative use of European Modernist architectural theories for the design of an affordable and compact house for a Wellington site." I dispute 'has' and believe 'had' should be used. The Firth House did not then, or recently receive any architectural awards.

If one contemplates the District Plan being in place in 1995, it is possible to reflect that the house might have remained original, but I would most certainly would not be the owner. The house was in urgent need of modernisation – whatever Firth’s merits or not as a modernist architect, the house had most certainly not stood the ‘test-of-time’ and was ‘out-of-time’.

### **8. Greg Bowron consulted**

Esteemed heritage architect and author Greg Bowron was invited to the Firth House circa 1994/95 to view the proposed redesign plans prepared by architect Barbara Webster. He raised no objections and indeed appeared to fully understand the need and reasons to make not insignificant changes to modernise the house.

### **9. Heritage Archives**

The archives documenting Modernism Architecture in New Zealand and the Firth House are a highly valuable resource for anyone studying the movement. The history of the house is extremely well-documented in publicly accessible archives including the National Library and Wellington City Council archives, and in several informed books, publications and essays. Any individual seeking to understand ‘the development of Modernism would learn far more from these archives and publications than the present physical structure on Vera Street. In this Museums Aotearoa report there is evidence that the public believe ‘heritage’ should reside within the museum and educational sector: <https://rb.gy/e2ngeo>.

The 2004 *Plischke Exhibition* at the City Gallery did far more for citizen engagement and education about modernism than ‘standing on the street looking up the drive at a structure of debatable authenticity’.

### **10. Architectural and Public Submissions**

It is noted that Council has received **no** submissions in support for scheduling the Firth House from the architectural profession, architectural heritage practitioners, architecture writers and commentators, and architecture academics. There were no submissions from heritage groups or the public. This suggests they either have no interest and don’t care about the house and its claimed ‘significance’, or they recognise that the house is no longer original and authentic with sufficient fidelity to warrant scheduling in the Plan.

### **11. Other more ‘intact’ examples in the region are not scheduled**

HHE Report June 2021: “(The) 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.**”

There has been no evidence presented that I’ve seen that Firth himself saw his own home at 18 Vera Street as demonstrating ‘an ideal solution to social housing’. I somehow doubt today an uninsulated, bitterly cold house with too much glass for the era; no heating other than one open fire; poor construction materials due to wartime constraints; poor weather-proof detailing; and with a tiny dark kitchen qualifies as ‘an ideal solution’. Perhaps this explains relatively-speaking, why so few modernist houses were in built in Wellington’s suburbs. They were not universally popular or well-received, and alternatives were clearly preferred.

I also dispute the claim in the HHE that the Firth House is a ‘highly **influential example** of an architecturally designed, relatively early Modernist dwelling and one influencing national state house design philosophy in the ensuing years’. No evidence has been presented that supports and qualifies this claim. Moira Smith also agreed that there was **no evidence** in her Statement of Evidence (Page 237). In my opinion Council is confusing Firth’s

legacy as an architectural commentator and writer, with the heritage value of the house. It seems much of the Council's case for scheduling revolves around Firth the architect and writer, and not the structure itself that now exists.

The HHE acknowledges that the Firth House is not 'intact'. A well-publicised, architectural award-winning, 100% preserved, original and authentic Cedric Firth designed home (The McKenzie House) is in Khandallah. It was not selected for inclusion in the District Plan for reasons not (yet) explained. Why does Council believe it and the community's heritage obligations and interests are satisfied by an unoriginal, much altered, insignificant house (the Firth), when there is a far better, proven candidate on its doorstep?

## **12. What is being protected?**

I question what is being protected and preserved; to what result; and what heritage values are being accurately protected by scheduling in the District Plan after the not insignificant changes were made to the house.

If I had known in 1994 that Council would take actions thirty years later that would materially impact the home's value, and deny me the opportunity to make alterations and develop the house (and thereby penalising me), I doubt I would have proceeded with the purchase.

Ends

2 May 2023