

## **Attachment H**

Council Assessment of the GWF (2012)

## **Gordon Wilson Flats**

320 The Terrace



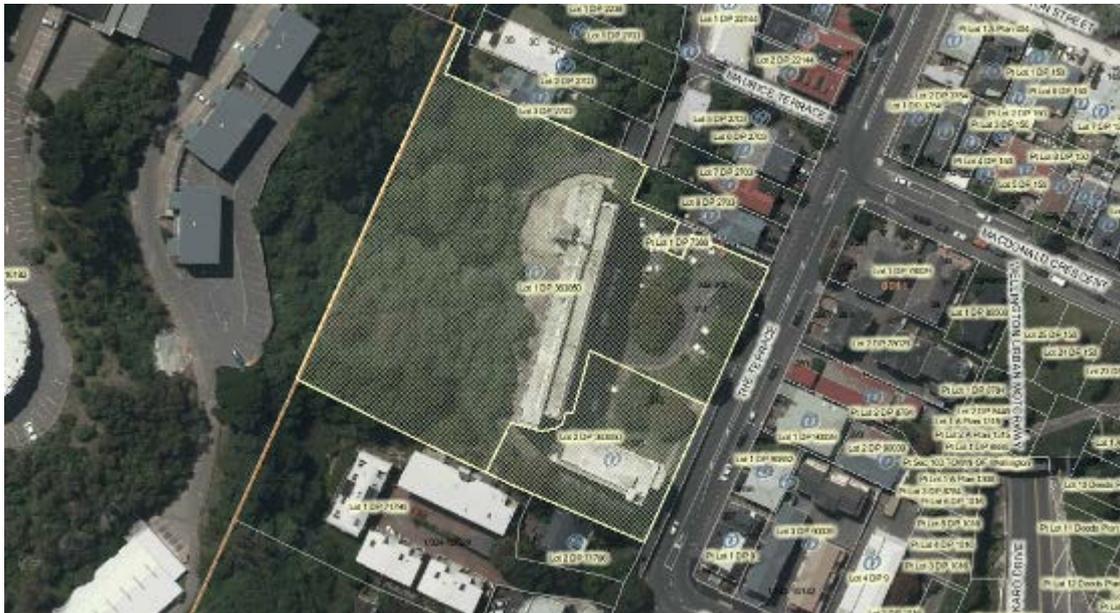
View of Gordon Wilson Flats from The Terrace      (*Charles Collins, 2015*)

### **Summary of heritage significance**

- The Gordon Wilson Flats have architectural value as a good representative example of 1950s Modernist high density social housing, that though common internationally, is relatively rare in New Zealand.
- The flats are associated with the social policy of the government of the day and were an endeavour to solve a chronic housing shortage. They were the last of the high-rise tower-block social housing developments designed by the Ministry of Works & Development. The flats are also associated with economic recovery in the 1950s which led to a boom in the building industry.
- The flats were designed by Government Architect Gordon Wilson, who died while the flats were nearing completion. It is for this reason they were named in his honour.

District Plan:	Map 16, Symbol 299
Legal Description:	Lot 1, DP 363050
Heritage Area:	None 2012
HPT Listed:	None 2012
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	The Terrace Flats
Key physical dates:	Built: 1957-1959
Architect / Builder:	Architect: Architectural Division of the Ministry of Works, under chief architect Gordon Wilson.
Former uses:	Low cost State Housing rental accommodation
Current uses:	Vacant as at May 2012 (evacuated - safety concerns)
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not EQP (IEP 27/11/2006, SR 210925)

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

The Department of Housing Construction was set up in 1936 by New Zealand's first Labour government to construct state rental houses.<sup>1</sup> Gordon Wilson was appointed chief architect of the Department in 1938, he became chief architect of the Housing Division of the Ministry of Works from 1943 – 1952, assistant Government Architect from 1948 – 1952 and Government Architect from 1952-59.<sup>2</sup> The Gordon Wilson Flats (originally known as The Terrace Flats), were renamed to honour Wilson when he died shortly before their completion in 1959.<sup>3</sup>

The flats were built on the site of the first residence of Mr George Hunter, the first mayor of Wellington.<sup>4</sup> They were sited next to the existing McLean State Flats (built 1943-44), an earlier social housing scheme of which Gordon Wilson was involved in the design and construction. The original plans are signed by 'Gordon Wilson, Government Architect' and dated August 1954, at a time when Wilson was Government Architect at the head office of the Ministry of Works. The detailed design was completed by the Wellington District Office of the Ministry of Works.<sup>5</sup>

New Zealand's state social housing (multi-unit) designs of the 1930s – 1950s were influenced by the 'International Style' of Modernism promoted by Swiss/French architect Le Corbusier, German architects Mies van de Rohe, Walter Gropius and others. The manifesto of Modernism spread from continental Europe in the 1930s, partly due to the Diaspora that fled from the oppressive regime in Nazi Germany at a time when Modernism was at odds with the prevailing political ideology. Two outstanding examples of New Zealand's state housing designed in the 'International Style' are the Berhampore (Centennial) Flats (1939-40), and the Dixon Street State Flats (1941-44). The Berhampore Flats were the Labour Government's first multi-unit scheme of social housing, and one of the first, largest and most complete schemes of buildings designed in the 'International Style' in New Zealand<sup>6</sup> and the similarly styled Dixon Street State Flats won the NZIA Gold Medal in 1947.

In New Zealand the best known Modernist architect 'refugee' was Austrian Ernst Plischke who worked for the Department of Housing Construction (c1939-1947)<sup>7</sup>. For some of this time he worked under Gordon Wilson as Chief Architect on designs for multiple-unit housing blocks. However, due to a personality clash, in 1942 Plischke became a community planner under Reg Hammond in the same department.

<sup>1</sup> See also: Ben Schrader, "Housing and government - State loans and state houses", *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 13-Jul-12, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/housing-and-government/page-2>

<sup>2</sup> Julia Gatley, "Wilson, Francis Gordon – Biography", from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1 September 2010, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5w36/1>

<sup>3</sup> "The Gordon Wilson Flats, Wellington: The Work of the Architectural Division, Ministry of Works," *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects*, Vol 28, No 1 (February 1961):1

<sup>4</sup> Wellington City Council, "Gordon Wilson Flats," *Heritage Inventory - 1995* (Wellington City Council, 1995)

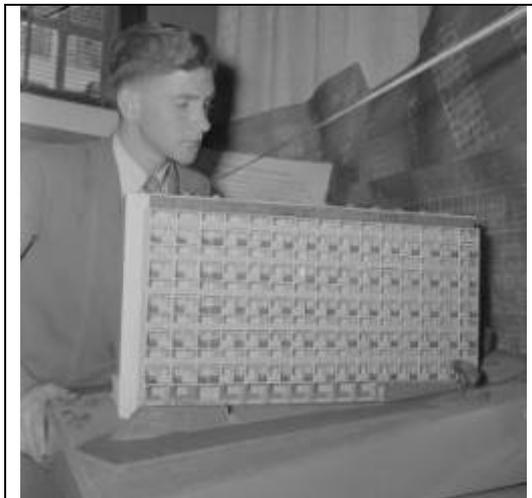
<sup>5</sup> "The Gordon Wilson Flats, Wellington: The Work of the Architectural Division, Ministry of Works," *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects*, Vol 28, No 1 (February 1961):1

<sup>6</sup> Julia Gatley, "For Modern Living: Government Blocks of Flats" in *Zeal and Crusade*, (Christchurch: Waihora Press, 1996), 53; also Julia Gatley, *Long Live the Modern: Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984*, (Auckland; Auckland University Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>7</sup> Linda Tyler, "Plischke, Ernst Anton - Biography", from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 30 October 2012, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5p31/plischke-ernst-anton>

The level to which Plischke may have been involved in the design of the building when he still worked under Wilson is unknown, but a 1942 drawing by Plischke shows a design for the McLean and Terrace Flats.<sup>8</sup> This drawing is slightly different from the final plans, the most notable differences being the siting of the building; that the staircase is located in the middle of the block, rather than at one end; and the monolithic finish of the building that is closer to the streamlined 'International Style' than the later 1950s Modernism of the Gordon Wilson Flats.

The final design of the Gordon Wilson Flats is somewhat similar to the Grays Avenue Flats in Auckland. The basic plan was designed to maximise views and sunlight on a difficult and steeply sloping site, and to manage costs, structure and amenities.<sup>9</sup> "After basic research by architects and associated specialist engineers, the solution finally adopted was to provide bed-sitting rooms in the basement and above that to make the remainder of the accommodation in two-bedroom flats on the maisonette principle."<sup>10</sup> The building was the last large, high-rise block of flats designed by the Ministry of Works, before a change in ideology led the provision of social housing solely by low density houses and low rise units.



An architectural model of Gordon Wilson Flats at a housing exhibition in 1955 (ATL, EP/1955/2193-F)

High-rise, high-density social housing schemes designed on Modernist principles have been identified as problematic in many European countries. In many instances social problems have been exacerbated by housing high-density, at-risk populations in building that were poorly maintained and with insecure communal spaces (particularly staircases & lifts). In New Zealand these problems have been exacerbated by structural problems with the innovative designs of the Modernist era, and in 2011 the nearby McLean State Flats were evacuated when they were deemed to be earthquake prone.<sup>11</sup>

The Gordon Wilson Flats were evacuated in May 2012 following an engineer's report commissioned by Housing New Zealand that identified the need for urgent remedial work to large concrete panels on the building's exterior facade. The media reported that "they could fall and crush people during an earthquake or strong wind..."<sup>12</sup> and the buildings population of over 130 residents were given seven days to vacate the building. Although some residents spoke to media about their sentimental attachment to the building including one who said that "This is my castle, I love it here,"<sup>13</sup> others were more equivocal noting problems with other marginalised, often anti-social tenants, and a lack of building maintenance.

<sup>8</sup> August Sarnitz, and Eva B Ottillinger, *Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World* (Prestel Publishing, 2004)

<sup>9</sup> "The Gordon Wilson Flats, Wellington: The Work of the Architectural Division, Ministry of Works," *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects*, Vol 28, No 1 (February 1961):1

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lane Nichols, 'Unsafe flats: Tenants told to leave within week', *Dominion Post*, May 10 2012, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/6897604/Unsafe-flats-Tenants-told-to-leave-within-week>

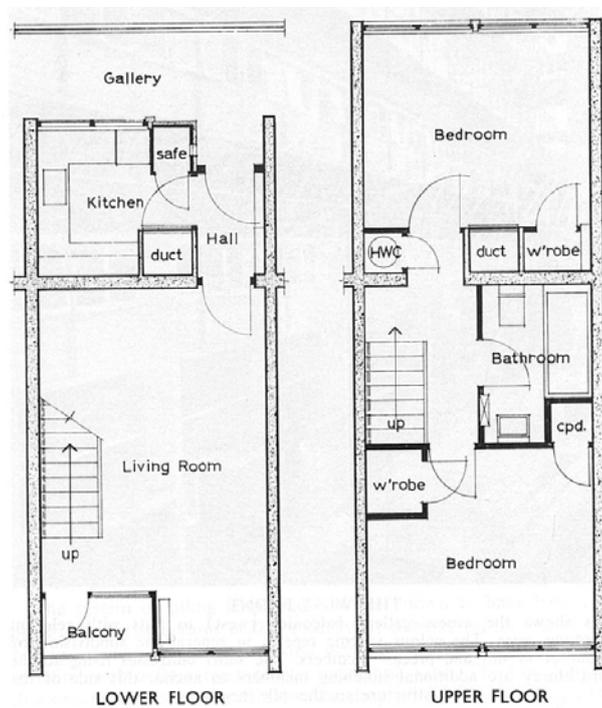
<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Lane Nichols, 'Unsafe flats: 'This is my castle.' *Dominion Post*, May 11 012 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/6900410/Unsafe-flats-This-is-my-castle>



Aerial view of the Gordon Wilson Flats under construction c1958-9. The McLean State Flats are to the left (Ref: EP-Industry-Housing-State-02, ATL)

## 1.2 Timeline of modifications



DETAIL OF PLAN  
Layout of a typical two double-bedroom maisonette flat. The distance between the cross walls is 12 ft.

Image reproduced from The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, p3

1957-9 Building constructed

2011 Replacement of stairwell windows, repair and replace membrane roof, replacement of service stair and safety railing, general fire upgrade, install 10 abseil anchor points on the roof, general repair and maintenance work (SR 226613, SR227008).

### 1.3 Architect

#### **(Francis) Gordon Wilson – Government Architect (1952 – 1959)**

Gordon Wilson's<sup>14</sup> began his public service career as chief architect for the Department of Housing in 1938. He had worked previously as an associate partner at Gummer and Ford and is known to have been involved in the design of the Remuera Public Library, Auckland Railway Station, Wellington Public Library, the National War Memorial and Carillon, and the National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum building in Wellington. The design of both the Wellington Public Library (now the City Gallery) and the Dominion Museum building have also been attributed to him. He continued with the Department of Housing until 1943 when he was appointed chief architect of the Housing Division of the Ministry of Works from 1943 – 1952, and progressed to assistant Government Architect from 1948 – 1952. He was Government Architect until his death in 1959.

The various civil service government architectural offices led by Wilson produced many buildings that were at the leading edge of architectural design style throughout the 1930s, 40s and 50s. The result was that he was able to attract many gifted young architects to the civil service, particularly the 'refugee architects who had fled Europe in the 1930s'.<sup>15</sup> Many of his protégées became noted architects in their own right including Ernst Plischke, Fred Newman, Helmut Einhorn, Ian Reynolds and George Porter.

The key buildings during Wilson's years in the NZ civil service include:

- Bledisloe State Building
- Flats in Grey's Avenue, Auckland
- Bowen State Building
- Gordon Wilson Flats
- School of Engineering building at the University of Canterbury
- University of Otago Dental School building

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<sup>14</sup> Julia Gatley, "Wilson, Francis Gordon – Biography", from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 1 September 2010,

<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5w36/1>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## **2.0 Physical description**

### **2.1 Architecture**

The Gordon Wilson Flats are a multi-storey block of social housing that varies in height from 7 – 10 storeys depending on topography. The building was designed with bedsitting rooms on the ground floor level(s) along with a caretaker's office, and storage for baggage and prams. There were 75 maisonette flats above ground floor and laundry washing and drying facilities on the roof. Each 64m<sup>2</sup> maisonette consisted of a lounge and kitchen at entry level, with a stair to two bedrooms and a bathroom on the upper level.<sup>16</sup>

Exterior of the building is dominated by the expressed structural grid pattern. A primary grid denotes the individual two-storey, two bay maisonette tenancies, and this is further divided by a secondary grid that divides the elevation of the maisonettes at bedroom floor level, and vertically through the bedroom and living room windows. Most of the visible structural elements are concrete, particularly the wall and floor slabs, the precast spandrel panels and window (mullion) posts. The balcony fronts were vitreous enamelled metal and were once decorated in an alternating pattern of red & blue, although this appears to have been over-painted at a later date. The concrete structure was designed as a fair-faced finish, although the internal walls of the apartments were generally papered or painted. The internal floors within the maisonettes were constructed in timber.

The building was partly built into a site that sloped steeply and the hillside was stabilised with a series of crib walls that step back into the hillside and retain up to 20m vertically. The building's piling system was a new technology for its time and consisted of pre-drilling the holes, filling them with reinforcement and aggregate, and pumping them full of a wet mix of sand and cement.

### **2.2 Materials**

Reinforced concrete piles, foundations, walls, floor-slabs, roofs, and stairs

### **2.3 Setting**

The Gordon Wilson Flats are located on a large, prominent, steeply sloping site on the Terrace and are a landmark that is visible from various points around the city, including Mt Victoria and Roseneath. The site includes the much smaller McLean State Flats (1943-44) designed in an earlier 'International Style'.

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<sup>16</sup> "The Gordon Wilson Flats, Wellington: The Work of the Architectural Division, Ministry of Works," The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, Vol 28, No 1 (February 1961): 6

### 3.0 Sources

Gatley, Julia. "For Modern Living: Government Blocks of Flats". In *Zeal and Crusade*. Christchurch: Waihora Press, 1996.

Gatley, Julia (Ed). *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984*. Auckland; Auckland University Press, 2008.

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Nichols, Lane. 'Unsafe flats: 'This is my castle.' *Dominion Post*. May 11 012 <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/6900410/Unsafe-flats-This-is-my-castle>

Sarnitz, August, and Eva B Ottillinger, *Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World*. Prestel Publishing, 2004.

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"The Gordon Wilson Flats, Wellington: The Work of the Architectural Division, Ministry of Works," *The Journal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects*, Vol 28, No. 1 February 1961:1-8

Tyler, Linda. "Plischke, Ernst Anton - Biography", from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated 30 October 2012, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5p31/plischke-ernst-anton>

Wellington City Council, "Gordon Wilson Flats," *Heritage Inventory - 1995* (Wellington City Council, 1995)

## 4.0 Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

### ***Cultural heritage values***

#### **Aesthetic Value:**

***Architectural:*** Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?

The Gordon Wilson Flats have architectural value as a good representative example of 1950s Modernist high-density social housing, that though common internationally, is relatively rare in New Zealand.

***Townscape:*** Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?

The monolithic high-rise block of flats is a significant visual element in the cityscape and has townscape value for that reason.

***Group:*** Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?

The Gordon Wilson Flats have a relationship to the neighbouring McLean State Flats, and the nearby Dixon Street Flats, forming a collection of buildings of similar design and purpose in the same part of central Wellington.

#### **Historic Value:**

***Association:*** Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?

***Association:*** Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?

The flats are associated with the social policy of the government of the day and were an endeavour to solve a chronic housing shortage. They were the last of the high-rise tower-block social housing developments designed by the Ministry of Works & Development (although there were several later high-rise social housing developments constructed by the Wellington City Council). The flats are also associated with economic recovery in the 1950s which led to a boom in the building industry.

#### **Scientific Value:**

***Archaeological:*** Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?

Central City NZAA R27/270

***Educational:*** Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?

***Technological:*** Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?

The building has technological value for the inclusion of equipment to measure earthquake movements, a practice that was not widely used in New Zealand at the time. The building also has technological value for being one of, if not the first, building in New Zealand to use the particular system of piling employed.

**Social Value:**

**Public esteem:** *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

**Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual:** *Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?*

**Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:**

*Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?*

*Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?*

This building fulfils an ongoing function as social housing, although this is in temporary respite while the earthquake prone status of the building is resolved.

**Sentiment/Connection:** *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

**Level of cultural heritage significance**

**Rare:** *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

**Representative:** *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

The Gordon Wilson Flats have architectural value as a good representative example of 1950s Modernist high-density social housing, that though common internationally, is relatively rare in New Zealand.

**Authentic:** *Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?*

The building has had relatively few intrusive modern alterations or additions and retains much of its original built fabric.

**Local/Regional/National/International**

*Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?*

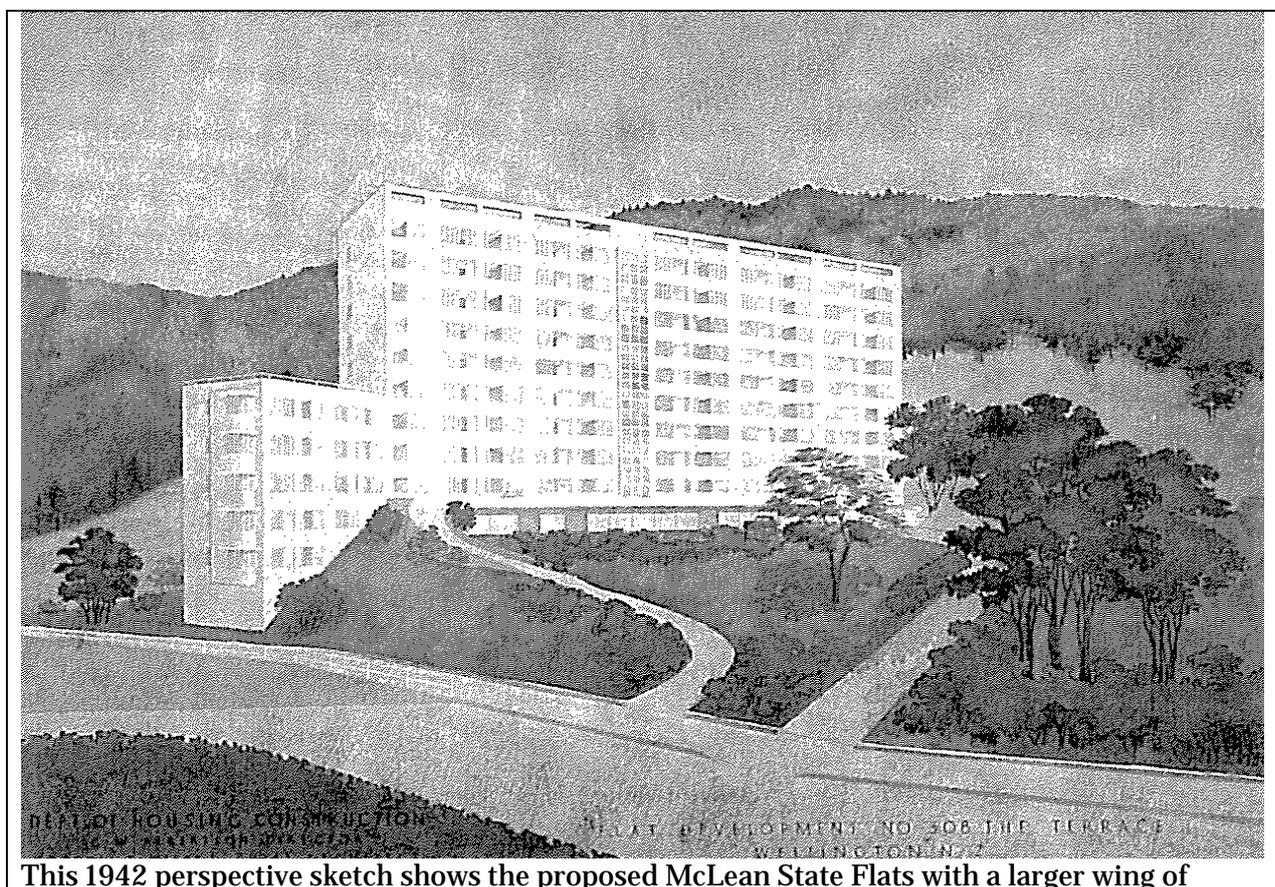
The building is of local significance as an example of Modernist high-density social housing. It is of some significance nationally as the last high-rise tower block designed as social housing by the Ministry of Works.

## 5.0 Appendix

### Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory	Y	
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	N	Not included
WCC Records – building file	Y	
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)	Y	
HPT website	N	Not listed
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)	Y	

### Background research



This 1942 perspective sketch shows the proposed McLean State Flats with a larger wing of

multi-storey flats behind that later became the Gordon Wilson Flats.<sup>17</sup>



Gordon Wilson Flats under construction circa 11 February 1957. The McLean State Flats are behind the Downer crane. *Evening Post*. (Timeframes EP/1957/0397-F)

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<sup>17</sup> Image: *Ernst Plischke: Modern Architecture for the New World*, p 148