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International working party for
documentation and conservation

of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the
modern movement

New International Selection
Full Documentation Fiche 2003

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composed by national/regional working party of: New Zealand

0. Picture of building/ group of buildings/ urban scheme/ landscape/ garden



depicted item: Dixon Street Flats
source: Photographs by Sarah Wild
date: 19 February, 2014

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1. Identity of building/ group of buildings/ group of buildings/ landscape/ garden

1.1 Data for identification

current name: Dixon Street Flats

former/original/variant name: n/a

number and name of street: 134 Dixon Street, Te Aro

town: Wellington

province/state: Wellington

post code: 6011 lot: Lot 2 DP 8016 (CT WN48C/375), Wellington Land District

country: New Zealand

national topographical grid reference: n/a

current typology: State rental flats

former/original/variant typology: State rental flats

comments on typology: The building was purpose-built in the 1940s to provide state rental flats in Wellington as part of the state housing scheme developed by the Labour Government in the previous decade.

1.2 Status of protection

protected by: The building is listed by Heritage New Zealand as well as scheduled by the Wellington City Council in the operative Wellington City District Plan – Heritage Section.

grade: Heritage New Zealand Category 1; no grading by the Wellington City District Plan

date: 27 June 1997 (Heritage NZ listing); 2000 (operative Wellington City District Plan)

valid for: whole building, including the exterior and interior, and site in the Heritage NZ listing; exterior of the building in the Wellington City District Plan.

remarks: Heritage New Zealand Listing: Number 7395; Scheduled as a Category 1 building, the highest category of listing in New Zealand.¹

Wellington City District Plan – Heritage Section: no listing of its heritage values; Map Reference: 17; Symbol Reference: 101.²

¹ Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, 'Dixon Street Flats', *The List*, accessed 15 November 2014, <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/7395>

² Wellington City Council, 'Heritage: Chapter 21 Appendix', Accessed February 14 2014, <http://wellington.govt.nz/~media/your-council/plans-policies-and-bylaws/district-plan/volume01/files/v1chap21app.pdf>

1.3 Visually or functionally related building(s)/site(s)

name(s) of surrounding area/building(s): Pharmacy House (1983), Trinity Hotel (1968), Spinks' Cottage (1860), St John's Presbyterian Church (1885), Capital City Preschool (1990s), Victorian residential dwellings, and a pedestrian access to Percival Street.

visual relations: The Dixon Street Flats is a ten-storey high-density apartment building. The building has a narrow footprint and is orientated north-south running parallel to The Terrace ridgeline, with its south end stepping down according to the topography of the site. The building is orientated to look east over Wellington City's CBD and harbour, towards Mt Victoria. The building's shorter south end fronts Dixon Street. The building is flanked by Victorian residential dwellings to the west and south of the site; the notable St John's Presbyterian Church and Spinks' Cottage sit to the southeast on the opposite side of Dixon Street along with the Capital City Preschool; and commercial buildings to the east of the site step down the sloping terrain and include Pharmacy House and Trinity Hotel. A zig-zag walkway extension off Dixon Street provides a pedestrian connection to Percival Street, located to the west of the site.

functional relations: The Dixon Street Flats were one of six medium- and high-density blocks of state rental flats built by New Zealand's Labour Government during the period 1935 to 1949. Approximately 30,000 state rental houses were built during this period. The first of the state's higher density developments was the two- and three-storey Centennial Flats in Berhampore, Wellington (1939-40). These were followed by the Dixon Street Flats (1940-44), McLean Flats (1943-44) and Hanson Street Flats (1943-44), all in Wellington, and in Auckland, the Greys Avenue Flats and Symonds Street Flats (both 1945-47). There was some resistance to this building type in Auckland, hence the later date of the two Auckland schemes compared with the four Wellington ones. All six buildings are important within the development of New Zealand's modern architecture. They were followed in the mid-to-late 1950s by the Gordon Wilson Flats, alongside the McLean Flats in Wellington, and the Upper Greys Avenue Flats in Auckland.

other relations: The Dixon Street Flats, McLean Flats and Gordon Wilson Flats are all located in central Wellington. There is a visual connection between the three buildings and their sites due to their proximity to each other.

2. History of building(s) etc.

2.1 Chronology

commission or competition date: Land purchased on 21 February 1940

design period(s): Preliminary drawings were started shortly after the site's purchase

Contract drawings are dated September 1940

start of site work: Tenders were called December 1940

Building construction, March 1941 – March 1944

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completion/inauguration: The building was officially opened on 4 September 1943 by the then Minister of Works, Robert Semple.³

2.2 Summary of development

commission brief: Following its election to power in 1935, New Zealand's first Labour Government established a Department of Housing Construction to develop state housing schemes throughout the country.⁴ This was in response to a severe nationwide shortage of housing, especially in the urban areas of Auckland and Wellington, which accounted for 80% of the nation's shortage.⁵ The state's housing schemes were devised to provide predominantly single-storey, detached housing in the outer suburbs of the cities. However, the chief architect of the Department of Housing Construction, Francis Gordon Wilson, and the Minister of Housing, John A. Lee, agreed that there were distinct advantages to including multi-unit blocks of flats in the state housing programme for inner-city areas in both Auckland and Wellington.⁶ In line with this thinking, the Centennial Flats in Berhampore, Wellington (1939-1940), designed by Gordon Wilson, were the first of the higher density, multi-storey state residential developments to be constructed in this country.⁷

The large and rapid population growth of Wellington at this time was caused by the influx of labour into the capital to work in essential industries associated with World War II. The resulting extreme housing shortage in Wellington has been described thus: 'At Wellington, where sites were limited, building costs were high and where government employees had multiplied rapidly during the past few years, the demand was particularly strong'.⁸ The provision of state housing on the periphery of the city to meet this housing shortage was contributing to the city's urban sprawl. To assist in mitigating this effect, the Department of Housing Construction developed state rental housing schemes for Wellington's inner-city sites. It was considered that the construction of the Dixon Street Flats would make best use of valuable serviced land within the inner-city. The Department of Housing Construction purchased the Dixon Street site in February 1940.⁹

design brief: Contract drawings for this project were prepared in September 1940.¹⁰ The Dixon Street Flats' design as a slab apartment building was unprecedented in New Zealand. The building took its lead from the Berhampore Flats (1939-40) in Wellington and the work of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Lubetkin & Tecton Group in their development of slab apartment buildings in Europe and Britain.¹¹ The Dixon Street design comprised 116 flats within the one block.

building/construction: The tendering process began in December 1940. Four bids were received. The lowest tender, by Christchurch company JL Wilkins for £128,700, was accepted and the contract was awarded to this firm in early 1941. Construction commenced in March the same year with work on the flats due for completion one year later. However, construction fell behind schedule and the project was

³ Julia Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command: A History and Analysis of State Rental Flats in New Zealand 1935-49', MArch Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1997, pp. 127-128.

⁴ Julia Gatley, 'Going Up Rather Than Out: State Rental Flats in New Zealand, 1935-1949', in Barbara Brookes (ed.), *At Home in New Zealand: Houses History People* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000), p. 140.

⁵ Julia Gatley, 'Early Flats in Auckland', *New Zealand Historic Places Trust Journal*, May 1995, p. 13.

⁶ Lewis Martin, *Built for Us: The Work of Government and Colonial Architects, 1860's to 1960's* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2004), p. 166.

⁷ Gatley, 'Early Flats in Auckland', p. 13.

⁸ Nancy M. Taylor, *The Home Front, Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939-45, The New Zealand People at War*, Vol. II (Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1986), p. 799.

⁹ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 126.

¹⁰ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 127.

¹¹ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', pp. 136-139.

not completed until March 1944.¹² The total cost of construction was £174,844, at a cost of £1619 per unit, exceeding the original bid by £46,000. Construction costs were higher than expected due to the difficult wartime economic situation. The Government reclassified the building as a 'non essential' item with the application of additional construction rates while labour costs became more expensive as there was a general shortage of builders within the region at that time.¹³

Note: during the construction phase the Ministry of Works was created, in 1943, and the Department of Housing Construction became the Housing Division of the Ministry of Works.

completed situation: The Dixon Street Flats were officially opened on 4 September 1943 by the Minister of Works, Robert Semple. Of the 116 flats to be constructed, 80 were fully furnished and completed at the time of the official opening. 'Of these, 55 were to be allocated to returned servicemen and the remainder to married couples without children and to mothers living with their daughters'.¹⁴

Before the official opening of the building, ex-service women of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and Women's Auxiliary Army Corps (WAAC) tenanted 22 flats (11 single-bedroomed flats per defence unit accommodating 5 'girls'). These defence units vacated the flats in August prior to its completion and official opening.¹⁵

The completion certificate was issued on 1 March 1944.¹⁶

In 1947 the flats were awarded an NZIA Gold Medal.¹⁷

original situation or character of site: The site was previously owned by George Hunter, the first Mayor of Wellington. A building on the one-acre site was demolished in November 1940 to make way for the Dixon Street Flats.¹⁸

2.3 Relevant persons/organisations

original owner(s)/patron(s): New Zealand Government, managed by Housing New Zealand Corporation

architect(s): Department of Housing Construction / Housing Division of the Ministry of Works, under Chief Architect Francis Gordon Wilson

landscape/garden designer: n/a

other designer: n/a

consulting engineer: n/a

building contractor: JL Wilkins (main contractor)

¹² Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 127.

¹³ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 130.

¹⁴ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 129.

¹⁵ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 129.

¹⁶ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 129.

¹⁷ Julia Gatley (ed.), 'Dixon Street Flats', *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904-1983*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), p. 42.

¹⁸ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 127.

There are differences in opinion as to who is responsible for the design of the Dixon Street Flats. At the time of the flats' construction, Wilson was said to be the designer due to his position as Chief Architect and as such was ultimately responsible for the department's work. The evidence is inconclusive as to who was the main designer of building, although increasingly Ernst Plischke's input has been recognised. Since the late 1980s scholars have speculated on the building's authorship and have come to different conclusions.¹⁹ Julia Gatley notes that between 1940 and 1944, at least 15 other DHC staff worked on the drawings.²⁰ However, it is clear that the design of the block of flats was influenced by European precedents including Gropius' Siemensstadt scheme (1929) and his unbuilt apartment block projects exhibited at the Berlin Building Exhibition (1931), as well as van Tijen, Brinkman and van der Vlugt's Bergpolder Block (1934).²¹

Francis Gordon Wilson (1900-1959) was born in Perth, Australia. His family moved to Wellington when he was three years old and there he grew up and attended Wellington's Terrace School and Wellington Technical School. Wilson then went on to study at the Auckland University College School of Architecture from 1920, while at the same time working for the firm of Hoggard, Prouse & Gummer from 1920 to 1921. Following this firm's disestablishment, the successor firm of Gummer & Ford was created. Gordon Wilson worked there from 1923 to 1936. In 1928 he became partner of this firm where he is involved with notable projects such as the Auckland Railway Station, the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery, the National War Memorial Carillion, the Wellington Central Library and the New Zealand Insurance Building.²²

Gordon Wilson was the Chief Architect in the Department of Housing Construction / Housing Division of the Ministry of Works from 1936 to 1948. He was promoted to the role of assistant Government Architect in 1948 and was the Government Architect from 1952 to 1959. In his role as Chief Architect of the Department/Division, he is best known for buildings that embody the social ideals and reforms of the Labour Government combined with the international style of modern architecture. The state rental flats, notably the Centennial Flats, Dixon Street Flats and Greys Avenue Flats, are the best examples of this type of work.

In his later years, Wilson was also involved with the New Zealand Institute of Architects and served as Chairman of the Wellington Branch from 1955 to 1956. He was actively involved in the National Historic Places Trust and the Association of New Zealand Art Societies and also gained registration with the Royal Institute of British Architects. Today, Gordon Wilson is praised for his 'outstanding contribution not only to New Zealand's building stock but also to the development of modern architecture in this country'.²³

¹⁹ For more discussion on the authorship of the Dixon Street Flats see: Linda Tyler, 'The Architecture of E. A. Plischke', MA Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1986; Ken Davis, 'A Liberal Turn of Mind: The Architectural Work of F. Gordon Wilson, 1936-1959: A Cultural Analysis', BArch research report, Victoria University of Wellington, 1987; Julia Gatley, 'Privacy & Propaganda: The Politics of the Dixon Street Flats', *Fabrications: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 7, 1996, pp. 77-98; Julia Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command: A History and Analysis of State Rental Flats in New Zealand 1935-49', MArch Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1997; and Robin Skinner, 'Further Investigations into an Authorship: Reassessing the Dixon Street Flats Archive', *Interstices: a Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, Vol. 9, 2008, pp. 60-73;

²⁰ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 154.

²¹ Julia Gatley, 'Privacy & Propaganda: The Politics of the Dixon Street Flats', *Fabrications: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 7, (Kensington: Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand, 1996), p. 91.

²² F. E. Greenish, 'Obituary: Francis Gordon Wilson (F.), A.R.I.B.A.', *New Zealand Institute of Architects Journal*, March 1959, p. 56.

²³ Julia Gatley, 'Wilson, Francis Gordon', *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand - Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5w36/wilson-francis-gordon>

Ernst Anton Plischke (1903- 1992) was born in Vienna, Austria. He grew up and was educated in Austria where he attended the College for Arts and Crafts for four years followed by the Academy of Fine Arts for three years where he graduated as a civil architect and won the Master School prize. He worked with Frank Behrens, his professor, and Peter Behrens in Vienna from 1926 to 1928; with William Muschenheim in New York from 1929 to 1930; and in private practice in Vienna from 1930 to 1939. Following immigration, with his Jewish wife Anna Lang and her son Heinrich, to New Zealand in 1939, Plischke worked as a draughtsman in the Department of Housing Construction until 1942. He is reputed to have had a difficult relationship with Gordon Wilson, and distanced himself from Wilson by working as a community planner for the Housing Division from 1942 to 1947. He then left the Ministry and practised in partnership with Cedric Firth, under the name Plischke & Firth, until 1963 when he returned to Vienna and worked as Professor of Architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna until his retirement in the 1980s.²⁴

Plischke is best known for his private houses and his landmark Massey House (1951-57) on Wellington's Lambton Quay, which was the first curtain-walled high rise office building in New Zealand). Today, while Plischke 'is acknowledged as a pioneer of classical modern architecture in Austria, it is in New Zealand, and principally Wellington, that the majority of his architecture can be found'.²⁵ Living in New Zealand for 24 years, his contribution to the development of modernist architecture, more specifically the international style, in this country was exceptional.

2.4 Other persons or events associated with the building(s)/site

name(s):

association:

event(s):

period:

2.5 Summary of important changes after completion

type of change: covered carpark addition

date: 1950

circumstances/ reasons for change: weather protection of tenants' cars.

effects of changes: A carport shelter was added to the west of the building. The addition is transparent, independent of the main building and can be easily removed if reinstatement of the original design was required or desired. This change does not detract from the heritage value of the building.

persons/organisations involved: Housing New Zealand Corporation

²⁴ Linda Tyler, 'Plischke, Ernst Anton', *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand - Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5p31/plischke-ernst-anton>

²⁵ Linda Tyler, 'Ernst Plischke: Architect', exhibition booklet, 5 September – 28 November 2004, City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand.

type of change: ornamental balconies removed

date: 1959

circumstances/ reasons for change: unknown

effects of changes: The ornamental semi-circular balconies on the south and north facades were removed.

persons/organisations involved: Housing New Zealand Corporation

type of change: common room added at roof level – roof line altered to accommodate a fourth step on its south end

date: 1959

circumstances/ reasons for change: added tenant facility

effects of changes: The added roofline step, resulting from the new common room on the roof, was designed in keeping with the existing roofline profile. This change does not detract from the overall design of the building and its heritage value.

persons/organisations involved: Housing New Zealand Corporation

type of change: Lift vestibules altered

date: 1994

circumstances/ reasons for change: unknown

effects of changes: low impact on heritage value

persons/organisations involved: Housing New Zealand Corporation

type of change: glass security screens added along the first, second and third level galleries

date: unknown

circumstances/ reasons for change: security

effects of changes: The glass screens on the first, second and third level galleries provide additional security for the building. The screens are transparent and non-intrusive and therefore do not detract from the heritage value of the building.

persons/organisations involved: Housing New Zealand Corporation

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3. Description of building(s) etc.

3.1 Site/building character

The Dixon Street Flats are located on the north side of Dixon Street where the street doglegs towards the south. The block of flats steps down along its north-south axis, following the topography of the site, its lowest end closest to Dixon Street. The project aimed to provide new inner-city living as a solution to the urban sprawl and rapid population growth occurring within Wellington at the time.

The Dixon Street Flats were the first slab apartment block in New Zealand and like the other blocks of medium- and high-density rental flats built by New Zealand's first Labour Government, the building is an example of international modernism, characterised by unadorned wall surfaces, flat roofs, regular fenestration, and minimal ornamentation.

The building is a ten-storey monolith standing 100ft (30m) tall. Designed with an L-shaped plan, it runs north-south with an adjunct wing at right angles at the north end, facing towards the north. The building has a narrow footprint and utilises 21% of the site's land with the residual land consisting of a series of attached carports along the western boundary, a carpark to the east of the building including 20 parking bays and communal gardens and open spaces for the tenants. These frame the site on the east, north and west.

The exterior design and form of the Dixon Street Flats follow European precedents such as the Siemensstadt scheme by Walter Gropius in Berlin. The Dixon Street Flats have a simple rectilinear form with minimal ornamentation on all elevations. The block of flats has rhythmic and symmetrical fenestration on its east façade that is contrasted by the off-centre placement of the multi-level glazed internal stairwell. This stairwell's windows project up from the entrance doors and porch to the level of the parapet. The entrance is accessed via a walkway along the east elevation. The main entrance consists of double doors opening into the lobby with direct access to the circulation core and incorporates elevators and the main staircase.

On the east façade, each flat has a timber-framed set of four casement windows and a recessed balcony, to window height. Flower boxes are attached to the exterior of each balcony balustrade wall and are currently painted orange or green.

The west elevation of the Dixon Street Flats includes a series of open-air galleries that run the full length of the building. The lower three galleries have glass inserted for security reasons. Similar to the east façade, the off-centre placement of the multi-level glazed internal stairs interrupts the strong horizontality of these galleries. The south elevation of the north wing continues these gallery walls.

The building's north and south elevations feature semi-circular balconies, cantilevered from the reinforced concrete construction, measuring 4ft (1.2m) in diameter. The north facade extension employs the same window fenestration, recessed balcony and flower box design as the east façade.

Loadbearing reinforced concrete beam and slab formwork has been used as the primary constructional system with a wallpaper finish in the main living areas and paint finish in the bathrooms and kitchens. The use of concrete provides fire- and sound-proofing for party walls between units as well as providing shear earthquake resistance. Wooden joists and flooring are elevated above the concrete with the incorporation of an absorbent rubber pad in the gap between to minimise sound transfer. The flat concrete roof has been covered in a bituminous felt membrane to allow for laundry and drying room activities at this level.

The building comprises 116 units of which 115 have one bedroom and 1 has two bedrooms (originally designed for the caretaker). The internal layout of each unit includes a kitchen, bathroom and entrance located on the west side of the building and the living and bedrooms located on the east, to capitalise upon the views and morning sun; internal layouts are mirrored from unit to unit. Location of the non-living areas to the west also acts as a 'buffer zone' for sound from the galleries. The flats' original internal fit out consisted of 'living rooms ... fitted with bookshelves and an electric heater. Bedrooms were fitted with built-in wardrobes, and kitchens with cupboards, drawers, a food-safe, drying cupboards, an electric cooking range and a terrazzo sink top'.²⁶

Communal facilities included laundry and drying rooms located on the roof and at ground level. Rubbish was originally disposed of via a series of chutes in the galleries throughout the building, linked to the rubbish rooms.²⁷

3.2 Current use

of whole building/site: state rental flats

3.3 Present (physical) condition

of whole building/site: Overall, the building would benefit from some general maintenance and repair. The exterior has superficial deterioration including paint chipping and cracks around the ground floor entrance.

of surrounding area: The surrounding green areas within the site have been maintained, although the vegetation around the back is overgrown. Brick garden walls are cracked.

3.4 Note(s) on context, indicating potential developments

No threat of potential redevelopment is known.

Note: As the time of writing, the building was not listed on the Wellington City Council's list of earthquake prone buildings.²⁸

Note: Because the building is scheduled in the Wellington City District Plan – Heritage Section, resource consent would be required if additions, alterations or demolition were proposed.

4. Evaluation

Give the scientific reasons for selection for DOCOMOMO documentation

Intrinsic value

4.1 technical evaluation:

The Dixon Street Flats are of technical significance for their reinforced concrete construction. Because of the outbreak of World War II, building construction within New Zealand slowed as there was a

²⁶ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 143.

²⁷ This section draws from Julia Gatley's description of the Dixon Street Flats. See Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', pp. 139-145.

²⁸ Wellington City Council, 'List of Earthquake Prone Buildings as at 15/01/2014', Accessed February 18, 2014, <http://wellington.govt.nz/~media/services/rates-and-property/earthquake-prone-buildings/files/eq-bldgs-list.pdf>

shortage of both building materials and skilled labour. These factors encouraged the Housing Division of the Ministry of Works to use a wider range of building materials in its housing programme than it had prior to World War II. Reinforced concrete was one of these new materials. Use of reinforced concrete also enabled the Housing Division to build at higher densities than previously, i.e. to include blocks of flats within its state housing programme.²⁹ Since the 1940s, reinforced concrete has become a common and much used building material with the Dixon Street Flats retaining its status as the archetypal slab apartment block in New Zealand.³⁰

4.2. social evaluation:

The Dixon Street Flats were the first slab apartment block to be built in New Zealand. The building employed a new modernist design approach, which was symbolic of a progressive Department of Housing Construction and an innovative and ambitious Labour Government. Notably, the building was opened 6 months ahead of the scheduled completion date. This early opening was due to the impending general election, three weeks later. Thus, Julia Gatley writes: 'The building's high public profile, a result of its sheer size and the media attention it had generated during construction, created fertile ground on which the government was to capitalise, using the opening ceremony as a subtle component of its campaign'.³¹ The Labour Government was not unaccustomed to using its state housing schemes for political advancement; the earlier detached state housing scheme had also been used to further the political success of the Labour Government in the late 1930s. The National Party reacted against the Government's political use of the Dixon Street Flats' opening by launching a relatively successful advertising campaign to expose the limitations of the building's design to accommodate families with young children.³² But the consistent use of one-bedroom units can also be seen as progressive, providing accommodation for single people, childless couples and other groups who did not need a three-bedroom house on its own plot of land.

In addition to its high public profile and its use for political propaganda, the Dixon Street Flats and its site are of high social significance. New Zealand's first Labour Government is remembered for its wide-ranging social welfare programme. Its state rental housing programme was consistent with this broad social programme as it demonstrates its belief that all people should have access to a decent standard of housing.³³ The Government's commitment to high-density living in the inner-city areas of Wellington was also a strategic urban renewal plan to utilise valuable serviced land and to avoid worsening the city's urban sprawl.

New Zealand's state housing of the late 1930s and the 1940s was predominantly detached and semi-detached houses with some four-unit housing blocks also being built at that time. Only a small percentage of medium- and high-density blocks of flats were included in the housing programme. They were pre-dated by privately built apartment buildings such as Inverleith in Wellington's Oriental Bay (1922) and Shortland Flats in Shortland Street, Auckland (1923). Nonetheless, there was resistance to the construction of state rental flats in Wellington by members of the public before and during construction.³⁴ Cedric Firth acknowledged this in his 1949 history of state housing in New Zealand: 'To the ordinary citizen the term "flat" is indelibly associated with a tall barracks-like structure with poor

²⁹ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 126.

³⁰ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 121.

³¹ Gatley, 'Going Up Rather than Out', p. 150.

³² Gatley, 'Going Up Rather than Out', pp. 150-151.

³³ Gatley, 'Early Flats in Auckland', p. 13.

³⁴ See Gatley, 'Going Up Rather than Out', p. 142, for more information about early high-density living in New Zealand. Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 200.

accommodation and poor appearance'.³⁵ At the time of construction, the Labour Government worked to overcome these negative assumptions through newspaper advertisements and opinion columns.³⁶ It was not until the 1990s, however, that a greater number of Wellingtonians really embraced the idea of high-density, inner-city living.

4.3. cultural and aesthetic evaluation:

The Dixon Street Flats are of high aesthetic/architectural significance. Together with the Centennial Flats and McLean Flats in Wellington, and the Symonds Street Flats and Greys Avenue Flats in Auckland, this building embraces international modernist architecture. While the Labour Government's detached and semi-detached state rental houses were built to standardised designs, the medium and high density blocks of flats were individually designed within the Department of Housing Construction / Housing Division. Under the leadership of chief architect Gordon Wilson, the Department/Division chose to follow avant-garde European models for these buildings. Each design was of great interest to those employed within the department because the building type was closely identified with the development of European modernism.

The Dixon Street Flats were the first high-density state housing initiative undertaken by the first Labour Government. Subsequent medium- and high-density blocks of flats built by the Housing Division were modelled after the Dixon Street Flats. The 'ten-storeyed monolith... is the archetypal slab apartment block in New Zealand' and it was unprecedented in New Zealand domestic architecture at the time of its construction.³⁷ The Dixon Street Flats were awarded the NZIA Gold Medal in 1947.³⁸

The block of flats is an important landmark in Wellington as it stands 30m tall and is located near The Terrace ridgeline. The building is clearly visible from most aspects of the city as well as being a significant landmark when viewed from Wellington Harbour.

The Dixon Street Flats were designed in the office of Francis Gordon Wilson, the Chief Architect of the Department of Housing Construction / Housing Division of the Ministry of Works. Ernst Plischke was one of at least 16 other people who worked on the drawings and is believed, by some, to have played a major design role. Both men were important architects in New Zealand during the 1940s and 1950s. They contributed significantly to the establishment of modern architecture and more particularly the international style in New Zealand. The design, structure and detailing of the Dixon Street Flats are a key example of this.

³⁵ Cedric Firth, *State Housing in New Zealand* (Wellington: Ministry of Works, 1949), p. 34.

³⁶ Gatley, 'Going Up Rather than Out', p. 147.

³⁷ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 121.

³⁸ Gatley, 'Dixon Street Flats', p. 42.

Comparative significance

4.4 canonical status (local, national, international)

The Dixon Street Flats are of national significance for their architectural merit and social value. As the first slab apartment building in New Zealand 'its scale, planning and aesthetics were unprecedented in domestic architecture in this country'.³⁹ The building was used for the purposes of political propaganda. In terms of design, it employed modernist principles established by European precedents to create a well-ventilated and naturally lit building through rational modular planning and the use of reinforced concrete.

The building is listed as a Category I heritage place by Heritage New Zealand and is also scheduled as a heritage building on the Wellington City Council's district plan.

In addition, DOCOMOMO New Zealand included the building on its 'top 20' list of modern buildings in New Zealand, noting its architectural style and unprecedented apartment building form in New Zealand at the time.⁴⁰

The Dixon Street Flats are also included in *Long Live the Modern*, a book developed under the auspices of DOCOMOMO New Zealand, identifying 180 of New Zealand's best and most important extant modern buildings, sites and neighbourhoods.⁴¹

4.5 historic and reference values:

In her Master of Architecture thesis on Labour's state rental flats, Julia Gatley concluded that the first Labour Government's inclusion of blocks of flats in its state housing programme was commendable for many reasons. The building type 'provides accommodation to types of applicants other than families with children; it brought diversity to types of labour and materials being used within the state housing programme; it meant that good use was made of the valuable serviced land that was available for building; it helped to draw attention to urban issues and to address the problem of urban sprawl; it provided opportunities for political propaganda; and it entailed a direct New Zealand engagement with modernist ideals'.⁴² The Dixon Street Flats were one such block, but more than this, it was the first slab apartment building to be built in New Zealand and is one of the most admired of the 1940s blocks of state rental flats, as a result of its architectural value and landmark status.

³⁹ Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 121.

⁴⁰ Dennis Sharp and Catherine Cooke (eds), *The Modern Movement in Architecture: Selections from the DOCOMOMO Registers* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2000), p. 188.

⁴¹ Gatley, 'Dixon Street Flats', p. 42.

⁴² Gatley, 'Labour Takes Command', p. 244.

5. Documentation

5.1 archives/written records/correspondence etc. (state location/ address):

Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand.

Heritage New Zealand, Central Region, Level 7 Alan Burns House, 69-71 Boulcott Street, Wellington, New Zealand.

5.2 principal publications (in chronological order):

Firth, Cedric. *State Housing in New Zealand*. Wellington: Ministry of Works, 1949.

Greenish, F.E. 'Obituary: Francis Gordon Wilson (F.), A.R.I.B.A.'. *New Zealand Institute of Architects Journal*. March 1959, pp. 55-59.

Tyler, Linda. 'The Architecture of E. A. Plischke'. MArch thesis, University of Canterbury, 1986.

Davis, Ken. 'A Liberal Turn of Mind: The Architectural Work of F. Gordon Wilson, 1936-1959: A Cultural Analysis'. BArch research report, Victoria University of Wellington, 1987.

Gatley, Julia. 'Early Flats in Auckland'. *New Zealand Historic Places Trust Journal*, May 1995, pp. 13-15.

Gatley, Julia. 'Privacy & Propaganda: The Politics of the Dixon Street Flats'. *Fabrications: Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*. Vol. 7, 1996, pp. 77-98.

Gatley, Julia. 'Labour Takes Command: A History and Analysis of State Rental Flats in New Zealand 1935-49'. MArch thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1997.

Gatley, Julia. 'Going Up Rather than Out: State Rental Flats in New Zealand, 1935-1949'. In Barbara Brookes (ed), *At Home in New Zealand: Houses, History, People*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2000, pp. 140-54.

Sharp, Dennis and Catherine Cooke (eds). *The Modern Movement in Architecture: Selections from the DOCOMOMO Registers*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2000.

Martin, Lewis. *Built for Us: The Work of Government and Colonial Architects, 1860's to 1960's*. Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2004.

Tyler, Linda. 'Ernst Plischke: Architect'. Exhibition booklet, 5 September – 28 November 2004, City Gallery, Wellington.

Gatley, Julia. 'Dixon Street Flats'. In Julia Gatley (ed.). *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture, 1904-1984*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008.

Skinner, Robin. 'Further Investigations into an Authorship: Reassessing the Dixon Street Flats Archive'. *Interstices: A Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*. Vol. 9, 2008, pp. 60-73.

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Wellington City Council. 'Heritage: Chapter 21 Appendix'. Accessed February 14, 2014. <http://wellington.govt.nz/~media/your-council/plans-policies-and-bylaws/district-plan/volume01/files/v1chap21app.pdf>

Gatley, Julia. 'Wilson, Francis Gordon', *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand - Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. Accessed February 18, 2014. <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5w36/wilson-francis-gordon>

Tyler, Linda. 'Plischke, Ernst Anton'. *Te Ara: the Encyclopedia of New Zealand - Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. Accessed February 18, 2014. <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5p31/plischke-ernst-anton>

Wellington City Council. 'List of Earthquake Prone Buildings as at 15/01/2014'. Accessed February 18, 2014. <http://wellington.govt.nz/~media/services/rates-and-property/earthquake-prone-buildings/files/eq-bldgs-list.pdf>

Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga. 'Dixon Street Flats'. *The Register*. Accessed November 15, 2014. <http://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/7395>

5.3 visual material (state location/ address)

original visual records/drawings/photographs/others:

recent photographs and survey drawings:

film/video/other sources:

5.4 list documents included in supplementary dossier

n/a

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6. Fiche report

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date of report: February 2014

examination by DOCOMOMO national/regional section

approval by wp co-ordinator/registers correspondent (name): Dr Ann McEwan



sign and date:

15 November 2014

examination by DOCOMOMO ISC/R

name of ISC member in charge of the evaluation:

comment(s):

sign and date:

ISC/R approval:

date:

wp/ref. no.:

NAI ref. no.:

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