

GOOD CONSERVATION AND RESTAURATION PRACTICE FICHE

Composed by working party of: New Zealand

0. Waikohanga House (former Symonds Street Flats)



Depicted item: Symonds Street Flats, 44 Symonds Street, Auckland
Sources: Photographs by Julia Gatley
Dates: (i) About 2007; (ii) 26 February 2020

0.1 accessibility

Visible from the street but not accessible to the public.

- **Data for identification**

current name: Waikohanga House

former/original/variant name: Symonds Street Flats

address/ number(s) and name(s) of street(s): 44 Symonds Street, Auckland Central

town: Auckland

province/ state: Auckland

post code: 1010

country: New Zealand

geographic GPS coordinates: -36.85501896234472, 174.76758672430938

current typology: Postgraduate student housing (RES)

former/original/variant typology: Public housing; rental housing owned by central government (RES)

comments on typology: Reuse of this building from public housing to postgraduate student housing was ideal as it made best use of the original planning arrangements, including the entry, circulation and individual apartment units.

- **Status of protection**

protected by: Auckland Council

grade: A (the highest category) heritage building on the Auckland Council Unitary Plan

date: Initially scheduled in 2005 on the Auckland City Council's District Plan, Central Area Section.¹

valid for: Excludes the interior except for common spaces within the primary building (lobbies, stairwells and corridor)

remarks: Local authority name changes (Auckland City Council to Auckland Council) reflect amalgamations in 2010.

1. History of building(s) etc

- **Chronology**

Commission/ competition date: Land purchased in December 1939

design period (s): 1940-44

start of site work: 1945

completion/inauguration: June 1947

¹ Auckland Council, "Schedule 14.1 Schedule of Historic Heritage," *Auckland Unitary Plan Operative in Part*, <https://unitaryplan.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/images/Auckland%20Unitary%20Plan%20Operative/Chapter%20L%20Schedules/Schedule%2014.1%20Schedule%20of%20Historic%20Heritage.pdf>. Accessed 27 January 2026.

- **Relevant persons/organisations**

original owner(s)/patron(s): New Zealand Government
architect(s): Frederick Newman (project architect) working under Francis Gordon Wilson (chief architect), Department of Housing Construction (from 1943, the Housing Division of the Ministry of Works).
landscape/garden designer(s): N/A.
other designer(s): N/A.
consulting engineer(s): N/A.
building contractor(s): W. H. Whittaker & Co. Ltd.

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

name(s): University of Auckland.
association: Current owner.
event(s): N/A.
period: Since 2016.

- **Summary of important changes after completion**

type of change: Addition of elevator.
date(s): 1947.
circumstances/reasons for change: Delayed importation of elevator from Australia.
effect of changes: Installed shortly after the building was completed, the elevator is an integral part of the building, adding to its functionality. The lift shaft was included in the original design, however the delayed arrival of the lift from Australia resulted in this addition shortly after the completion of the main building.²
persons/organisations involved: Waywood-Otis (NZ) Ltd.

type of change: Alteration of basement car-parking into three lockable garage units.
date(s): 1949.
circumstances/reasons for change: Enhanced resident security.
effect of changes: The back block basement, initially used for tenant car-parking, was converted into three lockable garage units in 1949. These units were "allocated by ballot and rented at 5/- per week".³ This change improved the functionality and security of the building for users.⁴
persons/organisations involved: Not known.

- **Summary of important changes after restoration**

type of change: Adaptation from public rental housing to postgraduate student housing.
date(s): 2016-18.

² 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, p. 203.

³ Gatley, "Labour Takes Command," p. 203

⁴ Gatley, "Labour Takes Command," p. 203.

circumstances/reasons for change: By 2013 the building was suffering from failing pipes, leaks and deteriorating drainage. From late that year, the government body responsible for it, Housing New Zealand Corporation, required the tenants to vacate it, and sought advice on its repair and making changes to bring it up to standards expected in the twenty-first century. Ultimately, however, Housing New Zealand decided to sell the building rather than proceeding with the works. As a result of the Category A heritage scheduling, demolition was prohibited by district plan rules. The University of Auckland purchased the building in 2016, with a view to adapting it for use as postgraduate student housing.

effect of changes: In the adaptation from public rental housing to postgraduate student housing, the scale and bulk of the building were retained, along with its original layout of apartment units. The concrete required some remedial strengthening in the foundations and some repair elsewhere, for example around lintels. The biggest changes were: (i) the removal of partitions between kitchens and living rooms, and the replacement of the kitchens and bathrooms in the individual units; (ii) the relocation of the communal laundries from roof-top to basement level; and (iii) subtle new roof-top additions in place of the old laundry deck, to allow for the construction of four new housing units, each of which is three-bedroomed and intended for postgraduate students with families.⁵ The rooftop additions and new elements such as balustrades continue the lines of the old, reinterpreted in contemporary materials, notably more glass. Original joinery was kept where possible. Overall, the building retains its original character. The blue-grey colour scheme the building has had for many years was also continued. An important aspect of this retention of original character is the continuity of residential use from design and completion through to today.

persons/organisations involved: University of Auckland as owners; RTA Studio as the design architects; Archifact as heritage architects providing conservation advice.

2. Description of building(s)

- **Site/building character**

Waikohanga House is located on the east side of Symonds Street where the land drops steeply away from street level down towards Grafton Gully.

Like the other blocks of medium- and high-density state 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 comprises two blocks, joined by a common stairwell. They form a T-shaped plan, with the front (north-west) block running parallel to Symonds Street, creating a strong street presence with its slightly curved (concave) façade. The back (south-east) block adjoins at a right angle. The front block's ground floor and basement are below street level. The back block is lower again with three storeys and a basement that includes three lockable garages.

⁵ Julia Gatley, "Dam Fine Curve," *Architecture New Zealand*, no. 2 (March 2019): 54-60.

The principal elevation of each block has a recessed balcony, with flower box, for each unit. This treatment echoes the design of Wellington's Dixon Street Flats (1940-44). The main façades also have timber-framed Whitney (concertina) windows.

Access to the units is via galleries on the south-east side of the front block and the south-west side of the back block. As mentioned, there is a central staircase that connects the two blocks. Access to the staircase and lift area is provided via the main Symonds Street entrance in the centre of the front block, where an entry bridge from Symonds Street provides access at first-floor level.⁶

Loadbearing reinforced concrete has been used as the primary structural system with a plastered and painted finish. Concrete party walls provide fire-protection and sound-separation between adjacent units. Brick was used in the stairwells and for gallery walls, and, like the concrete walls, is plastered and painted. Timber-framed walls divide interior spaces.⁷

Both blocks are one unit deep, ensuring good daylighting and natural ventilation for each.⁸ The building originally comprised 45 individual units: 26 one-bedroom units, 18 two-bedroom units and one three-bedroom unit.⁹ Each unit included "built-in bookcases, modern kitchen and bathroom fittings, rubbish chutes from all floors, lockers for milk, mail, etc., and communal laundries and workshop".¹⁰

Following development from public housing to postgraduate student housing, the building retains its original scale, bulk, circulation and location of units. The street elevation retains its subtle curve, individual balconies and flower boxes. Access from Symonds Street continues to be provided by a pedestrian bridge. Inside, the original terrazzo staircase and associated glass wall remain key features. As noted, the individual apartments were reorganised with the removal of partitions between kitchens and living rooms, and the replacement of the kitchens and bathrooms. Rooftop additions to provide additional units are sensitively designed in a contemporary architectural language with clean lines and a higher degree of glazing. Wall and roof planes are continued, and new upper-level balustrades take the form of the original curved ones, but in glass.

- **Current use**

of whole building/site: Postgraduate student housing.

of principal components (if applicable): Postgraduate student housing.

comments: The change from public rental housing to postgraduate student housing was highly consistent with the significance of the building because it required minimal change and ensured a continuation of the original residential use.

- **Present condition**

of whole building/site: Well maintained and in excellent condition.

⁶ Gatley, "Labour Takes Command," p. 202.

⁷ Gatley, "Labour Takes Command," p. 202.

⁸ "A City Flat in a Woodland Setting," *Home and Building*, January-March 1948, p. 14.

⁹ Gatley, "Labour Takes Command," p. 207.

¹⁰ "A City Flat in a Woodland Setting," p. 15.

of principal components (if applicable): All retained and legible.

of other elements (if applicable): N/A.

of surrounding area (if applicable): The area is considerably more built up than it was in the 1940s. The University of Auckland and adjacent Auckland University of Technology are both increasing the density of their campuses, meaning more high-rise buildings in this part of Symonds Street.

comments: A busy bus-stop immediately outside the building impacts upon the building because of the noise of buses, although this is reducing as Council invests in an increased number of electric buses.

3. Evaluation of restoration/conservation

Intrinsic value

- **Technical evaluation:**

Waikohanga House is of technical interest for its original reinforced concrete construction. The 2016-18 adaptation project made best use of the original concrete foundations, walls and floors throughout. The work included some strengthening and repair of the concrete.

- **Social evaluation:**

Waikohanga House is of high social value. The building is an important surviving example of the modernist blocks of rental flats built by New Zealand's first Labour government between 1938 and 1947. New Zealanders elected this government in 1935, at the end of the Great Depression. It was known for wide-ranging social policies, of which the provision of public housing was one aspect. The state rental housing programme was a fundamental expression of the broader social programme, and demonstrates the first Labour government's belief that working people should have access to a decent standard of housing. While most of Labour's 30,000 housing units were detached or semi-detached houses, the housing programme also included about a dozen blocks of state rental flats. The Symonds Street Flats – now Waikohanga House – were one of these. The flats served as public rental housing until 2013-14 when the building was vacated due to concerns about its condition. The building was sold to the University of Auckland in 2016. The residential use continues today, following the University of Auckland's adaptation of the building from public rental housing to postgraduate student housing. Continuity of residential use is an important aspect of the building's high social value today.

- **Cultural and aesthetic evaluation:**

Waikohanga House is of high aesthetic and architectural value. The building is one of six blocks of flats, built by the first Labour government between 1938 and 1947, that have been identified as significant in the development of New Zealand's modern architecture. They confirmed the country's embrace of international modernism, with clean surfaces, flat roofs, regular fenestration and minimal ornamentation. Public housing had been central to the development of modernist architecture in various European countries, and these buildings demonstrate that this was the case in New Zealand also. Of the six buildings, one (the Hanson Street Flats) has been demolished and a second (the McLean Flats) is planned for demolition in 2026, along with the neighbouring Gordon Wilson Flats built 1954-59. Of those built in the 1930s and 1940s, this leaves the Berhampore Flats and Dixon Street Flats in Wellington, and Waikohanga House (the Symonds Street Flats) and Greys Avenue Flats in Auckland. Of the four, Waikohanga House is particularly admired for its

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architectural design, which is enhanced by the subtle concave curve of the street façade, to echo the curve of the street onto which it fronts. The architectural value of the building was retained in the adaptation project, right down to the colour scheme. Rooftop additions are subtle and have minimal impact on the form and appearance of the building.

4. Documentation

- **Archives/written records/correspondence etc: (state location/ address)**

Original building records are held at Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

- **Principal publications (in chronological order):**

"A City Flat in a Woodland Setting." *Home and Building* 10, no. 4 (January-March 1948): 14-15.

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

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.

Leach, Andrew. "Public Service: Social Factors in the Architecture of F. H. Newman." *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, no. 1 (2002): 110-30.

Leach, Andrew. *Frederick H. Newman: Lectures on Architecture*. Ghent: A&S Books, 2003.

Thompson, Wayne. "Tenants Told to Leave Leaky Heritage Flats." *New Zealand Herald*, August 8, 2013. Accessed September 12, 2025.

www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10908650

Speer, Lauren, and Julia Gatley, "Symonds Street Flats," DOCOMOMO International Full Fiche, Approved 21 May 2015. [www.docomomo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Symonds Street Flats DOCOMOMO-full fiche 2015.pdf](http://www.docomomo.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Symonds_Street_Flats_DOCOMOMO-full_fiche_2015.pdf).

Gatley, Julia. "Dam Fine Curve." *Architecture New Zealand*, no. 2 (March 2019): 54-60.

Auckland Council. *Schedule 14.1: Schedule of Historic Heritage*. Accessed September 12, 2025. <https://unitaryplan.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/images/Auckland%20Unitary%20Plan%20Operative/Chapter%20L%20Schedules/Schedule%2014.1%20Schedule%20of%20Historic%20Heritage.pdf>.

- **Visual material (state location/ address)**

original visual records/drawings/photographs/others: Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

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Post restoration photographs: Photographed by Patrick Reynolds for Julia Gatley, "Dam Fine Curve," *Architecture New Zealand*, no. 2 (March 2019): 54-60.

film/video/other sources: None known.

- **List documents included in supplementary dossier**
NA.

5. Fiche report

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Examination by DOCOMOMO national/regional section

approval by working party co-ordinator/registers correspondent (name): Ann McEwan

sign and date: AM / 27 January 2026

examination by DOCOMOMO ISC/R

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