

City Gallery Wellington

25 Harris Street



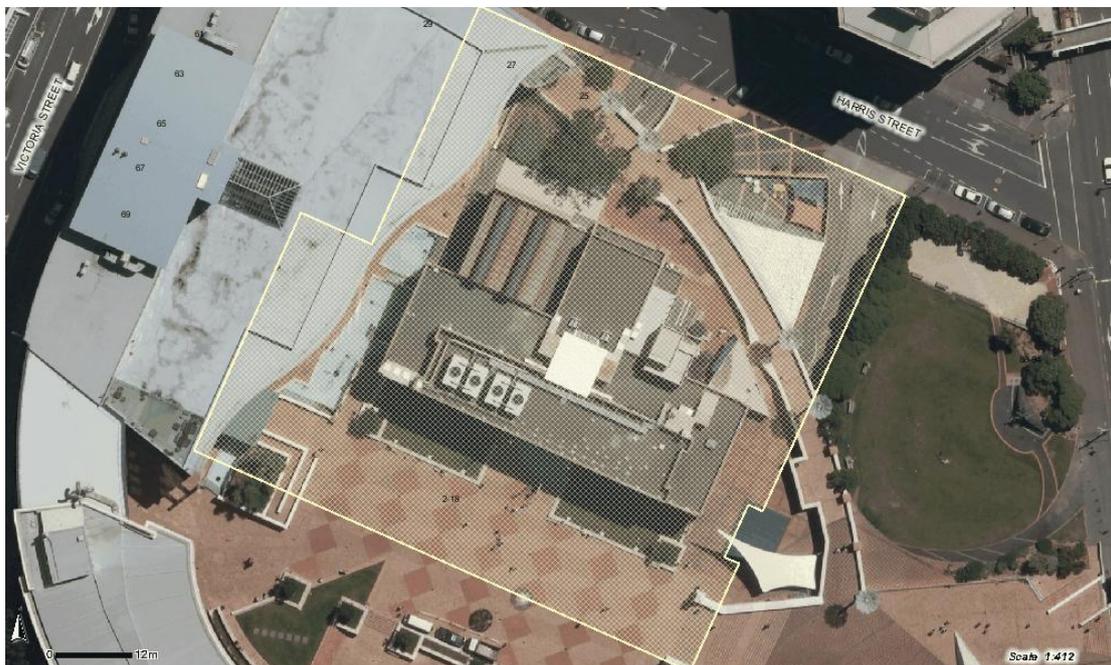
Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The City Gallery Wellington, Wellington's home of contemporary art, formerly the Wellington Public Library, has a high level of aesthetic value. It is a fine example of the inter-war stripped Classical style, skilfully designed by some of New Zealand's most prominent architects.
- This building is held in high public esteem as the home of the public library in Wellington for over 50 years, part of the long history of public libraries in Wellington.
- As the home of City Gallery Wellington, it has retained this public and civic function and added to Te Ngākau Civic Square as the city's cultural heart.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 70
Legal Description:	Lot 8 DP 10801
Heritage Area:	Civic Square Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	Category 2, reference 1451
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R27/270
Other Names:	City Gallery, Wellington Public Library (former)
Key physical dates:	Built: 1939
Architect / Builder:	Architects: Gummer and Ford with Messenger, Taylor, and Wolfe
Former uses:	Civic and recreational – library
Current uses:	Civic and recreational – art gallery

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The Wellington City Art Gallery began life as the Wellington Central Library, opening in 1940. Wellington has a long history of libraries, and the first library – the *Port Nicholson Exchange and Public Library* – opened in 1841 in a raupo hut at the foot of Charlotte (now Molesworth Street). The library closed in 1842 and the books were presented to the *Mechanics Institute*, who purchased the hut and continued to run the service through until 1843. In 1850, the library, by then known as the *Wellington Athenaeum and Mechanic's Institute*, reopened in a small house near Plimmer's Steps. In 1877 the library was transferred to the premises of the *Athenaeum* in Lambton Quay. The first Wellington City Council public library building opened on the corner of Mercer and Wakefield Streets in 1893, and Thomas Rowe was appointed City Librarian.¹

The Free Public Library faced a number of challenges, as early as 1905 the Mercer Street building was deemed to be too small and inadequate for its purposes.² In 1923 the Wellington City Council decided to extend the original library building on the corner of Mercer and Wakefield Streets in the hope that a more up-to-date facility could follow in a few years' time.³ This became a reality when a design competition was held in 1935. The competition called for a two-storey building that would cost approximately £50,000. The building was required to occupy most of the street-block between Mercer, Harris and Victoria streets, and to be set back from Mercer Street by a wide terraced lawn. Other requirements include the provision of basement offices and a lecture room, several elevators, a children's room, music room and a reference library.⁴

Unusually the competition was won by two firms, Messenger, Taylor, and Wolfe of New Plymouth, and Gummer and Ford of Auckland. Gummer and Ford had won first place for their plan, while Messenger, Taylor, and Wolfe won first place for their elevation. The two firms agreed to collaborate and re-draw the plans incorporating the best features of both designs. The judges of the competition were Cecil Wood, a Christchurch architect, and J. Norrie, the Wellington City Chief Librarian.⁵

The building was completed in 1940 and served as Wellington's central public library for over 50 years. Its location in the city's civic centre made it the backdrop for a range of community, social and political events and gatherings over the years. The men's toilet on the Harris Street side was a beat, a sex-on-site venue for men interested in men.⁶ The number of library patrons eventually outstripped capacity and a new library designed by Athfield Architects opened next door in 1991 as a part of the development of the Civic Square.⁷ The construction of the square had some impact upon the setting of the Library, particularly with the removal of the front

¹ Wellington City Council, 'CIVIC1', *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non Residential Building*, (Wellington City Council, 2001) CIVIC1.

² 'Wellington Public Library', *New Zealand Herald*, Volume XLII, Issue 12843, 17 April 1905, Page 5.

³ 'A New Library', *Evening Post*, Volume CV, Issue 94, 20 April 1923, Page 10.

⁴ '£50,000 Building. Architects Award. New Wellington Library', *Auckland Star*, Volume LXVI, Issue 297, 16 December 1935, Page 11.

⁵ Wellington City Council, 'CIVIC1', *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non Residential Building*, (Wellington City Council, 2001) CIVIC1.

⁶ Kerryn Pollock, 'Wellington Central Library (Former) – 101 Wakefield Street, Civic Square, Wellington', *Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga*, 16 May 2022, accessed 09 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1451>

⁷ *Ibid.*

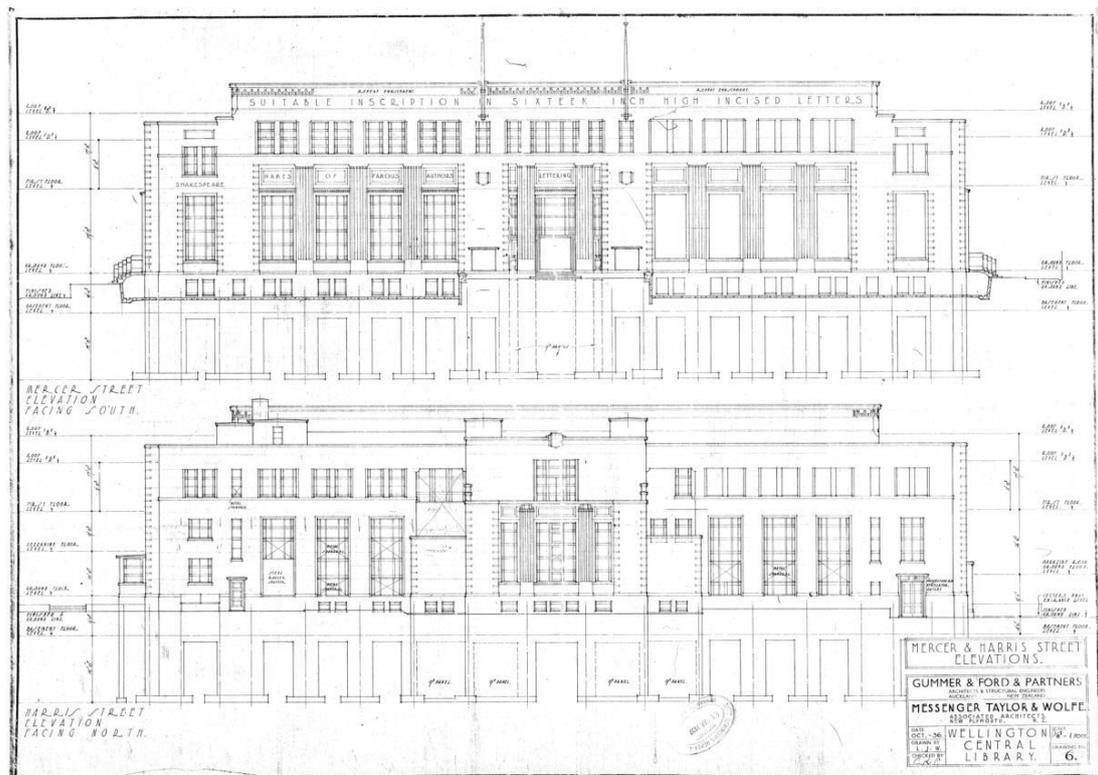
terrace lawns. The external ground level was raised and the basement 'area' in-filled so that the basement windows are now obscured.

The old public library was subsequently converted to the City Art Gallery and opened in 1993. In 1994 an art installation '*Fault*' by Bill Culbert and Ralph Hotere was installed, which consists of two diagonal strips of fluorescent lighting across the ground floor and upper floor windows respectively.

In 2008-2009 the City Gallery closed renovation. At this time an addition was constructed to north-west corner of building. An auditorium and three new gallery spaces were created, including one devoted to the exhibition of Maori and Pacific art.

The Gallery reopened in 2009 with an exhibition by Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama which involved a distinctive public artwork that covered the Civic Square façade of the gallery building in hundreds of multicoloured vinyl dots.⁸ In 2010 the rooftop cooling towers were replaced, ensuring the continued use of the building as a gallery space.

The building continues to be a much-valued part of the Civic Square and retains a high symbolic value as a place where artistic and educational values are promoted and celebrated. It is an integral element to the sense of continuity with the cultural history of Wellington City and an important part of Wellington's positioning as New Zealand's arts capital.



WCA 00056: 195: B17048 – plans

⁸ 'Dotted re-opening for City Gallery', 22 September 2009, accessed 9 July 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/2888705/Dotted-reopening-for-City-Gallery>

1.2 Timeline of modifications

1937	Mercer Street [29 Harris Street], public library (00056:195:B17048)
1942	29 Harris Street, repair earthquake damage (00056:279:B22480)
1943	29 Harris Street, repair earthquake damage (00056:281:B22571)
1951	29 Harris Street, alterations (00056:400:B30789)
1959	29 Harris Street, building alterations (00058:120:C5807)
1978	8-18 Mercer Street [25 Harris Street], central library basement (00058:1158:C49893)
1981	Mercer Street [25 Harris Street], convert basement into children's library (00058:1369:C57320)
1989	29 Harris Street, demolition (00059:337:E18711)
1990	29 Harris Street, cooling towers (00059:405:E20812)
1993	29 Harris Street, demolish Planetarium (00060:27:1049)
1997	29 Harris Street [25 Harris Street], City Gallery, roof extension and stair access (00078:321:37670)
1990	101 Wakefield Street, 29 Harris Street or 65 Victoria Street, Civic Square Stage 1, central Library and basement carpark stage (00059:376:E19888)
1990	29 Harris Street, roof over carpark - Civic Square/Centre (00059:404:E20759)
1997	8 Mercer Street [25 Harris Street], additions and alterations to City Gallery foyer (00078:189:38312)
1997	29 Harris Street [25 Harris Street], City Gallery, roof extension and stair access (00078:321:37670)
2008	25 Harris Street, Stage 1, demolition (00078:3163:175601)
2009	25 Harris Street, City Gallery Civic Square, two hand basins level 3, one hand basin level 1 (00078:3068:199853)
2009	25 Harris Street, additions to north-west corner of building containing auditorium and art galleries (00078:3640:185323)

1.3 Occupation history

1940 – 1993	Wellington Central Public Library
1993 – Present	Wellington City Art Gallery

1.4 Architect

Gummer and Ford, with Messenger, Taylor, and Wolfe.

Gummer and Ford

The architectural partnership of Gummer and Ford was established in 1923 and became one of national importance. William Henry Gummer (1884-1966) was articled to W.A. Holman, an Auckland architect, and was elected as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1910. In the period 1908-1913 he travelled in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. During this time, he worked for Sir Edwin Lutyens, leading English architect of the time, and for Daniel Burnham in Chicago. Burnham was a major American architect and one of the founders of the influential Chicago School of Architecture. Gummer joined the firm of Hoggard and Prouse of Auckland and Wellington in 1913. In 1914 he was elected a Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, was president of the Institute from 1933-34 and was later elected a life member.

Charles Reginald Ford (1880-1972) was born in England and served in the Royal Navy. He was later with Captain Scott's 1901-1904 expedition to Antarctica. He trained as an architect working in Wanganui as an engineer. In 1926 he wrote the first treatise on earthquake and building construction in the English language. Ford was president of the New Zealand Institute of Architects from 1921-22. Buildings designed by the partnership include the State Insurance Building Wellington, (1940) the Dilworth Building (1926), the Guardian Trust Building and the Domain Wintergardens (1921 and 1928), all in Auckland, and the Dominion Museum (1936) in Wellington.

Gummer and Ford were awarded Gold Medals from the New Zealand Institute of Architects for the designs of Auckland Railway Station and Remuera Library. Gummer was one of the most outstanding architects working in New Zealand in the first half of this century and was responsible for the stylistically and structurally advanced Tauroa (1916), Craggy Range (1919), Arden (1926), and Te Mata (1935) homesteads at Havelock North.

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The former Public Library is a fine example of an Inter-war stripped Classical building designed for an important civic purpose. The building is functional, with generous fenestration and a clear logic of planning. The Civic Square façade is symmetrical, its tempo set harmoniously by the six large fluted pilasters between the ground and first floors. These stylised pilasters have no capitals and give way to a plain entablature separated from the first floor by a railed string course. Moulded panes above the ground floor windows have been incised with words denoting the various categories of the former library: *Philosophy, Religion, Sociology, Science, Useful Arts, Commerce, Fine Arts, History*. The building is also a good representative of reinforced concrete construction, coupled with the use of steel window joinery. The interior has been modified sympathetically. The building has been somewhat truncated when the level of Civic square was raised, which has completely obscured the original basement area.

2.2 Materials

Reinforced concrete construction
Concrete Blocks
Steel window joinery
Brick
Stone

2.3 Setting

The setting of the former library has changed significantly since its construction, in particular the loss of the terraced entranceway, which originally gave the library an increased sense of grandeur. Its nearest neighbour is the new central library with its distinctive eastern, wavy, curtain-wall glass façade. Other near neighbours are the two large WCC office buildings, the Edwardian Classical Wellington Town Hall (WCC 17/325), and the concrete and stainless-steel Michael Fowler Centre. The former library is bounded to the east by the City to Sea Bridge, which is a large-scale piece of functional public art that links the Civic Square to the waterfront.

Despite the changes to the setting, the former library continues to make a significant contribution to the streetscape, as one of the five council owned buildings that surround the Civic Square. The library is the only building whose main façade faces into the Civic Square and has, as such, become the focus of Wellington's primary urban public-space.

Sources

‘Dotted re-opening for City Gallery’, 22 September 2009, accessed 9 July 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/2888705/Dotted-reopening-for-City-Gallery>

Pollock, Kerryn. ‘Wellington Central Library (Former) – 101 Wakefield Street, Civic Square, Wellington’. Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga, 16 May 2022, accessed 09 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1451>

Wellington City Council. *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001

Papers Past

Wellington Public Library’, *New Zealand Herald*, Volume XLII, Issue 12843, 17 April 1905, Page 5.

‘A New Library’, *Evening Post*, Volume CV, Issue 94, 20 April 1923, Page 10

‘£50,000 Building. Architects Award. New Wellington Library’, *Auckland Star*, Volume LXVI, Issue 297, 16 December 1935, Page 11.

Wellington City Archive

00056:195:B17048
00056:279:B22480
00056:281:B22571
00056:400:B30789
00058:120:C5807
00058:1158:C49893
00058:1369:C57320
00059:337:E18711
00059:405:E20812
00060:27:1049
00078:321:37670
00059:376:E19888
00059:404:E20759
00078:189:38312
00078:321:37670
00078:3163:175601
00078:3068:199853
00078:3640:185323

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 Wellington City Art Gallery, formerly the Wellington Public Library, has a high level of aesthetic value. It is a fine example of the inter-war stripped Classical style, skilfully designed by some of New Zealand's most prominent architects.

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 library is the only building whose main façade faces into the Civic Square and has, as such, become the focus of Wellington city's primary urban open space.

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 Wellington City Gallery is of significant townscape value for the contribution that it makes to Civic Square.

Historic Value:

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

This building is associated with prominent architectural firm Gummer and Ford, as well as architects Messenger, Taylor, and Wolfe.

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

There is a long history of public libraries in Wellington and this building was the city's central library for over 50 years.

Scientific Value:

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

Although the building was constructed post 1900, it is situated in the NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R27/270 and sited on reclaimed land R27/456.

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?*

There is some technical value in the construction of this building, particularly in the use of reinforced concrete.

Social Value:

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

This building is held in high public esteem as the home of the public library in Wellington for over 50 years. More recently as the home of the City Gallery, it has retained this public and civic function.

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 provides a sense of continuity with the cultural and educational history of Wellington and remains in use as an important civic institution.

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?*

This building is a good representative of the inter-war stripped Classical style designed for an important civic purpose by prominent architects. The construction and materials used are representative of the technologies available at the time of construction.

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?*

Although the purpose of this building has changed over time, it retains a great deal of authenticity and integrity. The exterior has had few negative alterations and the interiors, although modified for use as an art gallery, has retained many of its original features, finishing's and fittings.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

This building is locally and regionally important for its history (and ongoing use) as a major civic institution. It has a high level of aesthetic value and contributes significantly to the townscape qualities of Civic Square. It has some technical value in the use of reinforced concrete construction, and the exterior has a high level of authenticity.

3.0 Appendix

2021 - Review against revised heritage assessment criteria

Significant heritage values – [A, B, C, F]

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