

## Departmental Building

15 Stout Street



*Image: Charles Collins -2015*

### Summary of heritage significance

- The Departmental Building is one of the finest examples of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century civic/government building in Wellington. It is notable for its distinctive Moderne-style curves, for bold scale of its construction, and for the high quality of its design, materials and workmanship.
- This building has significant townscape value as it is a large scale building, on a prominent corner site, that is visible from major traffic and pedestrian routes. It contributes to the Stout Street Heritage Area and has group value with its near neighbours for their shared sense of scale, design, and history.
- The building has been in use by various government departments from 1940 – 2007 when it was sold to a private investor. It has a historic association with the reforming 1935 Labour Government, and with the New Zealand Defence Force who was the building's major tenant from the mid 1980s to 2007. It was also used to portray a 'typical' government building in popular satirical TV comedies of the 1980s.

## Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History<sup>1</sup>

The Departmental Building, sited at 15-21 Ballance Street, was completed in 1940 on land that had been reclaimed from the Lambton Harbour in a number of stages from the mid to late 1870s. The building was designed in 1935 by Government Architect John T. Mair. Work began in late 1935, but had to be suspended in 1936 in order to acquire additional land at the corner of Ballance and Stout Street. A contract to lay the foundations for the building was let to Fletcher Company Ltd, and the foundations were completed in 1938. In 1937 a contract was entered into with William Cable and Co Ltd. for the erection of the steel framework for the building, and in late 1938 a contract was let for the tonalite work. It was estimated that the construction would cost £500, 000.

In 1939 tenders for the main part of the building were received, with the specification being for a building entirely finished in fire resistant materials. By this time, the need to curtail imported materials due to the war was felt, and the specifications had to be revised, substituting timber and other New Zealand products for metalwork. Fresh tenders were called and the lowest tender, belonging to Fletcher Company Ltd. was accepted, while a separate contract for heating and hot water was let to Jenkins and Mack Ltd.

The construction of the building was mostly completed by 1940, and at that time was the largest office building erected in Wellington. It was needed to deal with the development of the state service under the first Labour Government. Up until this point the home of the public service in Wellington was the nearby Government Buildings and a number of ancillary offices around the central city. The Departmental Building took the pressure off the Government Buildings and aggregated Government departments that had been forced to separate. This idea, however, was interrupted by World War Two as the building was taken over as the New Zealand Defence Headquarters, and later part of the building would become the headquarters of the Security Intelligence Service.

In 1953 penthouse offices were added to the building, completed by WM Angus for £40, 595. In 1976 the Cabinet Works Committee approved plans to refurbish the building, which was to be carried out in six stages and included the replacement of boilers, provision of penthouse to house building services equipment, extension of the lift shaft and some demolition work and restoration on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. As a part of this refurbishment the walls and windows were water blasted and waterproofed by Commercial Decorators Ltd.

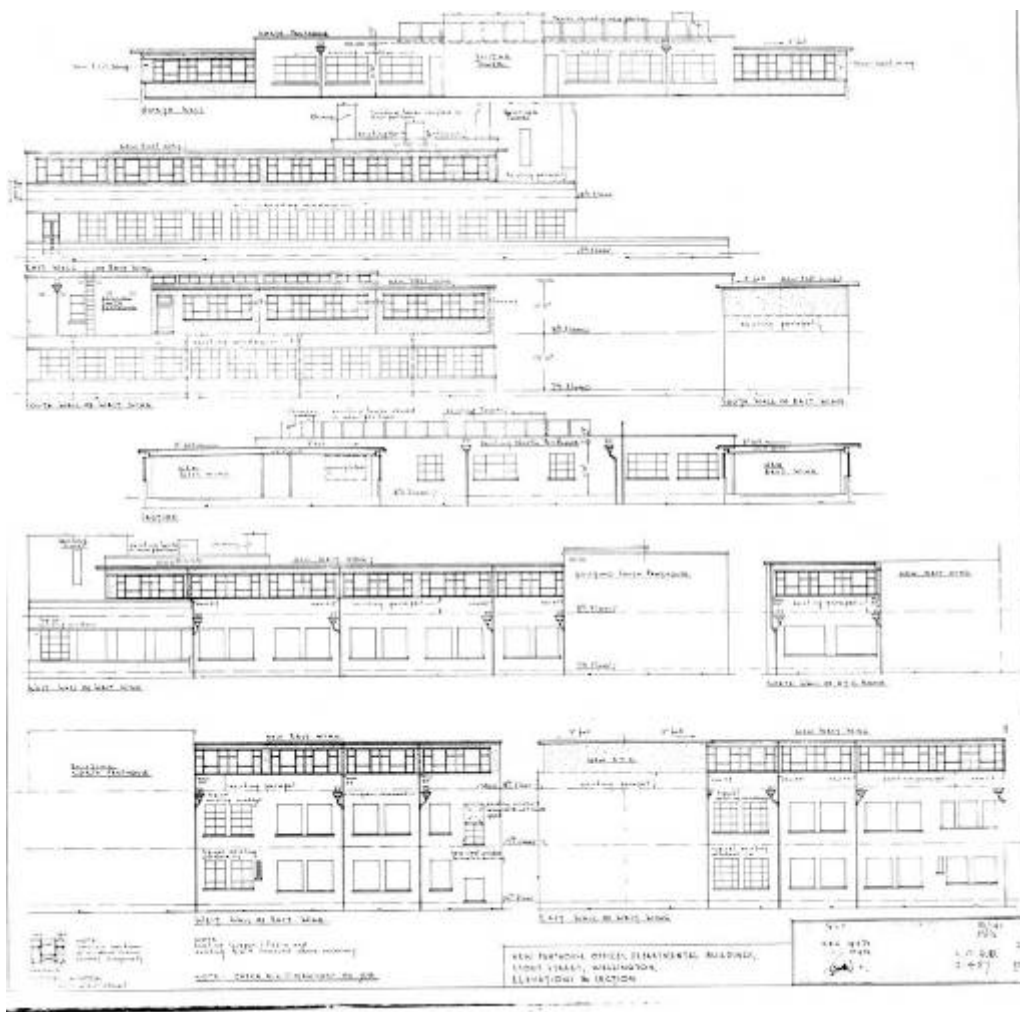
In 1983 the ground floor, including the elevators, was renovated. The work included replacement of damaged wall marble in the foyer and the Kairuru treads, risers, and landings, and the laying of new vinyl flooring. The building was refaced in 1985 with panels of white quartz chip aggregate, some of which was ground from the original stone cladding. The panels were fixed with bronze brackets to create a cavity between the panel and the building; this was to overcome water seepage problems that had eroded the original stonework. The coursing and pattern of the original exterior was maintained, and the colour of the concrete matched to the un-weathered colour of the stone. In 1989 the building underwent a major renovation and the interior was gutted although some care was undertaken to maintain as many original fittings as possible.

<sup>1</sup> History adapted from Ian Bowman, 'Conservation Plan Stout Street Departmental Building' unpublished conservation plan commissioned by the AMP Capital Property Portfolio, 2009 and the WCC Heritage Inventory 2001 ref STOU2

The building was then fitted out for the major tenant – the Defence Department, which would take up six floors. At this time a verandah was also constructed in front of the main entrance of the building. The Defence Department remained the major tenant of the building until 2007, and when the Department vacated the building it remained empty for the following five years.

Ownership of the building has changed hands several times in the past few years with the building being sold in 2011 to Maurice Clark, managing director of McKee Fehl construction, then sold again in 2012 to commercial property company Argosy Property who purchased the building and intend to refurbish the interior.<sup>2</sup> The building is somewhat famous in popular culture as the ‘face’ of Roger Hall’s television shows “Gliding On” and “Market Forces”, with its relatively plain, characterless façade, being considered archetypal of a Government building.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Timeline of modifications (original plans are held at National Archives )



1953 Plans showing addition of penthouse offices (WCA 00044:5:71)

<sup>2</sup> 'Argosy buys Wellington landmarks', Dominion Post, 19/12/2012, accessed 8 July 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/business/commercial-property/8098075/Argosy-buys-city-landmarks>

<sup>3</sup> Wellington City Council, 'STOU2', *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*, (Wellington City Council, 2001) STOU2.



---

1953	15-21 Stout Street (Ballance Street), addition of penthouse offices (00044:5:71)
1988	15-21 Stout Street, refurbishment, ground floor and levels 1- (500059:190:D9174)
1988	15-21 Stout Street, alterations to ground floor and levels 1-5 (00059:227:D10525)
1990	15-21 Stout Street. Level 6, office building additions and Alterations (00059:421:E21257) 15-21 Stout Street. Basement photo lab additions and alterations (00059:434:E21675)
1993	15-21 Stout Street, Government Property Services, ventilation (00060:21:845)
1994	15-21 Stout Street, alterations, ground floor (00061:8:10215) 15-21 Stout Street, level 5 office fit out (00060:152:5581) 15-21 Stout Street, guard box (00060:188:6759)
2000	15-21 Stout Street Ground floor interior fit out (00078:420:61732)

### 1.3 Occupation history

1940	New Zealand Defence Force
2007	Defence Force Vacate building – empty

### 1.4 Architect

Government Architect – John Thomas Mair (1876-1959)

John Thomas Mair (1876-1959) was born in Invercargill and began his career with the New Zealand Railways on the staff of the Office Engineer, George Troup. In 1906 he travelled to the United States of America where he studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. He then worked in the office of George B. Post in New York before travelling to England where he was admitted as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He became a Fellow in 1940. On his return to New Zealand he entered private practice, one of his first buildings being the Presbyterian First Church, Invercargill (1915), a prominent building of Romanesque character. He then practised in Wellington, carrying out largely domestic commissions. In 1918 he was appointed Inspector of Military Hospitals by the Defence Department, and in 1920 he became architect to the Department of Education. Following the retirement of John Campbell in 1922, Mair was appointed Government Architect, a position which he held until his retirement in 1942. During this period he was responsible for a variety of buildings, including the Courthouse, Hamilton, the Post Office in High Street, Christchurch, Government Life Office and the Departmental Building, both in Wellington, and the Jean Batten Building, Auckland. Such buildings show a departure from tradition, with the emphasis on function, structure and volume as opposed to a stylistic treatment of the building fabric. A Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, Mair was made a Life Member in 1942. His son John Lindsay Mair also practised as an architect.<sup>4</sup>

## 2.0 Physical description

---

<sup>4</sup> Historic Places Trust 'John T. Mair', *Professional Biographies*, accessed 5 July 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Mair.+John+Thomas>

## **2.1 Architecture<sup>5</sup>**

Once the largest office building in the city, the Departmental Building has eight principal stories and covers the greater part of its block. It was designed by the Government Architect John Mair in a streamlined but restrained Moderne style that is highly compatible with the adjoining State Insurance building. It is supported on a reinforced concrete primary structure and finished with a flat roof terrace above which simple profiled metal forms contain lift overruns and mechanical equipment. The visual bulk of the building is greatly ameliorated by the plan form which has a recessed central bay on Stout Street contained between two curved “book-ends” at either corner of the building.

Although the design is essentially very functional and is quite uncompromising for that, it has architectural distinction for its careful proportions, highlighted by the gracefully rounded “book-ends” and the sleek horizontal lines generated by the interleaving of the long unbroken spandrels and the regularly spaced bronze windows which follow elegantly around the curves. The base is faced with granite, the upper parts with modern composite stone panels; this use of materials reflects the palette of materials on the neighbouring State Insurance building.

The main entrance is in the centre of the building, covered with a modern steel and glass canopy, and is highlighted with a tall sculpted pediment feature rising above the roof level and centred on the façade (designed to be seen from afar, this feature is now scarcely visible except from directly in front of the building). Some original internal features, including stairwells, remain. The Departmental Building forms a prominent and significant part of the Stout Street streetscape.

## **2.2 Materials**

The main materials used in the construction are steel, reinforced concrete, Putaruru ignimbrite, Coromandel tonalite, Hanmer marble, steel and bronze windows, and timber. There is also a small amount of Kairuru marble used on details such as window sills.

## **2.3 Setting**

The Stout Street Departmental Building is a highly visible inner city building. It is substantial and can be seen from a number of major traffic routes as well as from a number of pedestrian routes. It is a part of the Stout Street Heritage Area, which also includes the State Insurance buildings, the Public Trust, the Supreme Court, Missions to Seamen, Wellesley Club, and the Old Government Buildings. It is also visible from the Railway Station and from the Parliamentary Precinct.

The scale of many of the adjacent buildings is similar south of Ballance Street, with the Supreme Court and Missions to Seamen being two storeyed and Old Government Buildings being four storeys. The ages of the buildings are Victorian/Edwardian or Inter-war, and have coherence as a group. There are a range of styles in the blocks that surround the Departmental Building, its neighbour the State Insurance Building has a stylistic connection, although it is a more exuberant example of the Modern style. The other buildings in the area range from the Edwardian Baroque Public Trust, the Neo Classical Supreme Court, the Neo Georgian Wellesley Club, the Romanesque Missions to Seamen, and the Italianate Old Government Buildings.

---

<sup>5</sup> Note: this repeats the architectural description from the ‘Stout Street Heritage Area’ unpublished report for WCC DPC 48 (2006)

### **3.0 Sources**

Bowman, Ian. 'Conservation Plan Stout Street Departmental Building.' Unpublished conservation plan commissioned by the AMP Capital Property Portfolio, 2009.

Historic Places Trust. 'John T. Mair', *Professional Biographies*, accessed 5 July 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Mair,+John+Thomas>

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

#### **Wellington City Archive**

00044:5:71  
00059:190:D9174  
00059:227:D10525  
00059:421:E21257  
00059:434:E21675  
00060:21:845  
00060:152:5581  
00060:188:6759  
00061:8:10215  
00078:420:61732

## 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 Departmental Building is one of the finest examples of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century civic/government building in Wellington. It is notable for its distinctive Moderne-style curves, for bold scale of its construction, and for the high quality of its design, materials and workmanship.

**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?*

This building has significant townscape value as it is a large scale building, on a prominent corner site, that is visible from major traffic and pedestrian routes.

**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 building contributes to the Stout Street Heritage Area and has group value with its near neighbours for their shared sense of scale, design, and history.

#### **Historic Value:**

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

This building is associated with John Thomas Mair - the Government Architect.

It is associated with the public service, the Security Intelligence Service which used the building as its headquarters, and the Defence Department which was the major tenant from the mid 1980s until 2007.

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

This building is associated with the reforming Labour Government of 1935, the introduction of social reforms, and the expansion of the civil service.

The building also became well known to the public through Roger Hall's television series, "Gliding On" and "Market Forces", as it was used as the location for the "Stores Department".

#### **Scientific Value:**

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

This building is associated with the land reclamations of the 1870s, and is also situated in the NZAA Central City 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?*

There is technical value in the construction of this building, particularly in the steelwork. The framework was specially designed to make use of the electric welding instead of riveting which is unusual in a building (of this size of this era). There is also value in the original use of Putaruru ignimbrite and Coromandel tonalite as an external cladding – the Putaruru stone did not perform well and was replaced in 1985. The Coromandel stone matches its use on Parliament and the State Insurance building, and contrasts with the Tonga Bay granite used on the Public Trust building.

**Social Value:**

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

This building has public recognition through being featured on television shows “Gliding On” and “Market Forces”. It is a local landmark in the northern city for its design, form, scale, and materials, and its stylistic contrast with adjacent older buildings.

**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 contributes to a sense of place and continuity in the northern city as it is highly visible in key city vistas and is one of a nationally significant collection of heritage buildings, the Stout Street Heritage Area.

**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?*

The Departmental Building is one of the finest examples of a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century civic/government building in Wellington.

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

The building is a good representative example of a mid 20<sup>th</sup> century civic/government building

**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 retains significant authenticity of design and setting, and the building structure, plan form, Coromandel tonalite ground floor cladding, window joinery, stairs and basement all have authenticity of design, materials, and craftsmanship.

The exterior retains authenticity of design as it has been through a number of alterations. The interior has been significantly altered through a series of alteration and re-fits.

***Local/Regional/National/International***

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

The Departmental Building is a nationally significant building as it was the largest governmental office building in New Zealand at the time. It is a substantial work of Government Architect J.T. Mair. The need for the building on such a scale reflects the newly introduced policies of the 1935 Labour Government and the demand for public service accommodation. The building is particularly associated with the Defence Department as well as the Security Intelligence Service. The building is also an important element of the Stout Street Heritage Area, a collection of heritage buildings that together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, and use.

## 4.0 Appendix

### Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
WCC Records – building file		
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)		
HPT website		
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

### Background research

*Insert any relevant background information into this section. This may include:*

- *Additional plans, such as those for alterations*
- *Chunks of text from other sources such as Cyclopedia of NZ, Papers Past*
- *Additional images*