

Turnbull House

25-27 Bowen Street



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The building is a good example of a large, early 20th century, domestic residence, and was built for a wealthy and eccentric bibliophile. It was designed by William Turnbull, a prominent local architect who was known for his skill in the design of “Revivalist-style” buildings.
- The building has exceptional historic and cultural value as the home and library of Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull. Turnbull bequeathed to the country his collection of 55,000 books and manuscripts and this was housed in the building until the early 1970s. The building remains in use as a community venue.
- The building is held in high public esteem and this can be demonstrated in the campaign to prevent its demolition in the 1970s.
- Turnbull House has had significant recent work to reinstate elements of the façade removed in the 1950s and is now a good facsimile of the original. The building achieved its centenary in 2016 and makes a strong contribution to the sense of place and continuity in the otherwise ever-changing streetscape of Bowen Street.

District Plan:	Map 17, Symbol 37
Legal Description:	Lot 3 DP 2991, Lot 1 A 2948 & Lot 3 DP 10325
Heritage Area:	None WCC 2012
HPT Listed:	NZHPT Historic Place - Category I ref 232 Government Centre Historic Area ref 7035
Archaeological Site:	Pre: 1900 building activity on site / Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	The former Alexander Turnbull Library Elibank (early house on site) Kumutoto Road (Bowen Street)
Key physical dates:	1916 construction
Architect / Builder:	William Turnbull as <i>Thomas Turnbull & Son</i> Contractor: Campbell and Burke for approx £6,000 Interior library shelving: Kupli Brothers of Willis Street
Former uses:	Purpose built private house and library, Alexander Turnbull Library
Current uses:	Community venue

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull (1868-1918) was the fifth son of Walter Turnbull, who founded a successful firm of merchants and shipping agents in 1859. After his father's death in 1897, Alexander became managing director. His wealth allowed him to indulge his great love of collecting books, manuscripts and illustrations, particularly of or about New Zealand. He never married. His collection was the greatest in the country and scholars were invited to use it.

His housekeeper noted that "Mr Alex, of course, lived only for his books. He was very reserved, almost a man of silence. He had the books even on the bed in the spare room. Cases of books came every other mail. He had his agents buying for him. Books filled his mind."² His indulgence was at a great cost to the firm and in 1914 he was forced to sell the family home Elibank. Elibank became a nurse's home and a hospital was built on land fronting Bowen Street.³ Turnbull retained a portion of land and on it built the present Turnbull House; as a place to both live and display his collection.

Designed by William Turnbull (no relation), the house was built in 1916 by Campbell & Burke for approximately £6,000, the bookshelves were constructed by Kupli Brothers of Willis Street and cost an additional £729. Turnbull, by then chronically depressed, a near recluse⁴ and in failing health, died in neighbouring Bowen Hospital at the age of 50. He had only been in residence at Turnbull House for eighteen months. He bequeathed his entire collection of 55,000 volumes as well as manuscripts, paintings and drawings to the country with the intention that they become "the nucleus of a New Zealand national collection".⁵

The collection was so significant that even by the turn of the twentieth century it was considered to be New Zealand's national library and reference resource.⁶ By the beginning of the twentieth century the collection included the Cook (presumably Captain James Cook's) papers; first editions of Milton, Swinburne, Pope and Coleridge; and a New Zealand collection that included a fragment of writing by Te Kooti, the warrant for the arrest of Volkner's killer and a Bishop Selwyn speech. In 1910 the collection was increased by the donation of duplicates from, Turnbull's friend, Dr Hocken's Dunedin collection. In 1913 Turnbull made an anonymous donation of over 500 Maori artefacts and carvings to the Dominion Museum.⁷

The government accepted his extraordinary offer of the bequest of Turnbull's remaining collection and went on to purchase the building (including its furniture and fittings) that housed it. Alexander's older brother, Robert who resided at Turnbull House briefly after Alexander died, persuaded the Government to call the library the "Alexander Turnbull Library".⁸

The first curator, Johannes Carl Anderson, began work in January 1919. Anderson was offered a suite of rooms at the library but chose to live elsewhere, and the

¹ Note: History is based on the WCC Heritage Building Inventory 2001 ref Bowe 2 with additional information from the Conservation Plan prepared by Chris Cochran in 1991 for DoC.

² Chris Cochran, 1991, "Turnbull House Conservation Plan", Department of Conservation, Wellington p 10

³ Barry Clare, "Restoration planned for Turnbull House", *Evening Post*, 2 May 1995

⁴ Cochran, 1991, p.10

⁵ Cochran, 1991, p.10; Barry Clare, "Restoration planned for Turnbull House", *Evening Post*, 2 May 1995

⁶ Cochran, 1991, p.10

⁷ Cochran, 1991, p.10

⁸ McLean, G., 1988, "Historic Wellington Walking Tour", Reed Books, Auckland

resident caretakers were Miss Emily Brouard and Miss Hannah Grierson.⁹ *The New Zealand Listener* published an interview with Miss Brouard on her retirement in 1944 under the heading of “She dusted but did not read them.”¹⁰

The library officially opened on 28 June 1920¹¹ on the second anniversary of its benefactor’s death. The library was open to the public but visitors had to ring to gain admittance through the closed front doors to the collections beyond. The large room on the ground floor held the Rare Book Collection which doubled as the office for Johannes Anderson. The Pacific Collection was on the first floor in the New Zealand Room.

Bequests, donations and purchases expanded the collection. By the end of World War II it had doubled to 100,000 volumes. In 1955 the building was strengthened and refurbished to accommodate the collection. Exterior decoration was removed, and the gables were removed to be replaced by hips. The live-in quarters were reconfigured with the loss of the original kitchen, bathroom, pantry and the two maid’s rooms.¹² The library returned in 1957, but by 1973 the collection had trebled, and the transfer of the collection to larger premises was necessary. The collection was moved to temporary accommodation in the *Free Lance* building on the Terrace, and then to its permanent home at the new National Library Building in 1989.

Turnbull House was threatened with demolition when the library collection moved in 1973, and the site was identified for use for a possible on-ramp to the new motorway.¹³ The building was given a stay-of-demolition after the Ministry of Works offered a 10 year lease to the Wellington City Council in 1975. The council appointed the Turnbull House Council (a group of dedicated trustees) to administer the building, but with the continuing threat of demolition of Turnbull House.

The Turnbull House Council advertised that Turnbull House would not be demolished and called for members of the public to donate to a restoration fund. F.A. Langbein, the then director of roading at the Ministry of Works and Development, called the advertisements misleading and noted that he believed it was “inevitable” that Turnbull House would be demolished to enable Bowen Street to be widened. Ian Wards, then the chair of the Turnbull House Council replied that ...

“...citizens of Wellington – who alone could determine the future of Turnbull House – must show without ambiguity what they want. Wellington was not a concrete jungle without a valued past and a creative future, and they must support the restoration fund more generously than ever.”¹⁴

There was strong community opposition to the proposal to demolish Turnbull House¹⁵ and the Council managed to fill the building with tenants, including a variety of small community groups. In 1990 ownership transferred from the State Services Commission to the Department of Conservation. In 1995 conservation work restored many missing exterior features.

⁹ Cochran, 1991, p.11

¹⁰ Cochran, 1991, p.11

¹¹ Cochran, 1991, p.11

¹² Cochran, 1991, p.11

¹³ Cochran, 1991, p.18

¹⁴ *Evening Post* or *Dominion* article titled “Turnbull House Won’t Be Demolished”, circa 1970s [note a copy is held on the WCC file for Turnbull House, but is undated].

¹⁵ Barry Clare, “Restoration planned for Turnbull House”, *Evening Post*, 2 May 1995

A life-long bachelor, Turnbull's private life and sexuality has been speculated about by biographers and historians. Eric McCormick and Chris Brickell have taken a circumspect approach, considering that he may have been what today would be understood as gay, but noting a lack of definitive evidence, whereas Stephen Eldred-Grigg has described him as a 'wealthy homosexual merchant, bibliophile, philanthropist and advocate of fin de siecle aestheticism'.¹⁶

Turnbull House was closed to the public in 2012 pending earthquake strengthening.¹⁷ Management of the House passed to Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga in 2017. In 2022, a multiyear project commenced including seismic strengthening and refurbishment of the interior, with the intention to reopen the building for public use.¹⁸



1880s photograph of Elibank. Image: Alexander Turnbull Library ref ID: 1/2-032297-F

¹⁶ Natalie Marshall, 'Turnbull House – 25-27 Bowen Street, Wellington Central – Pipitea, Wellington', Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga, 21 October 2015, accessed 09 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/232>

¹⁷ 'Historic Turnbull House to close pending earthquake strengthening', 24 August 2012, accessed 17 April 2014, <https://www.doc.govt.nz/news/media-releases/2012/historic-turnbull-house-to-close-pending-earthquake-strengthening/>

¹⁸ 'Bright Future for Turnbull House', Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga, 28 March 2022, accessed 09 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/news-and-events/news/2022-march-28-bright-future-for-turnbull-house>



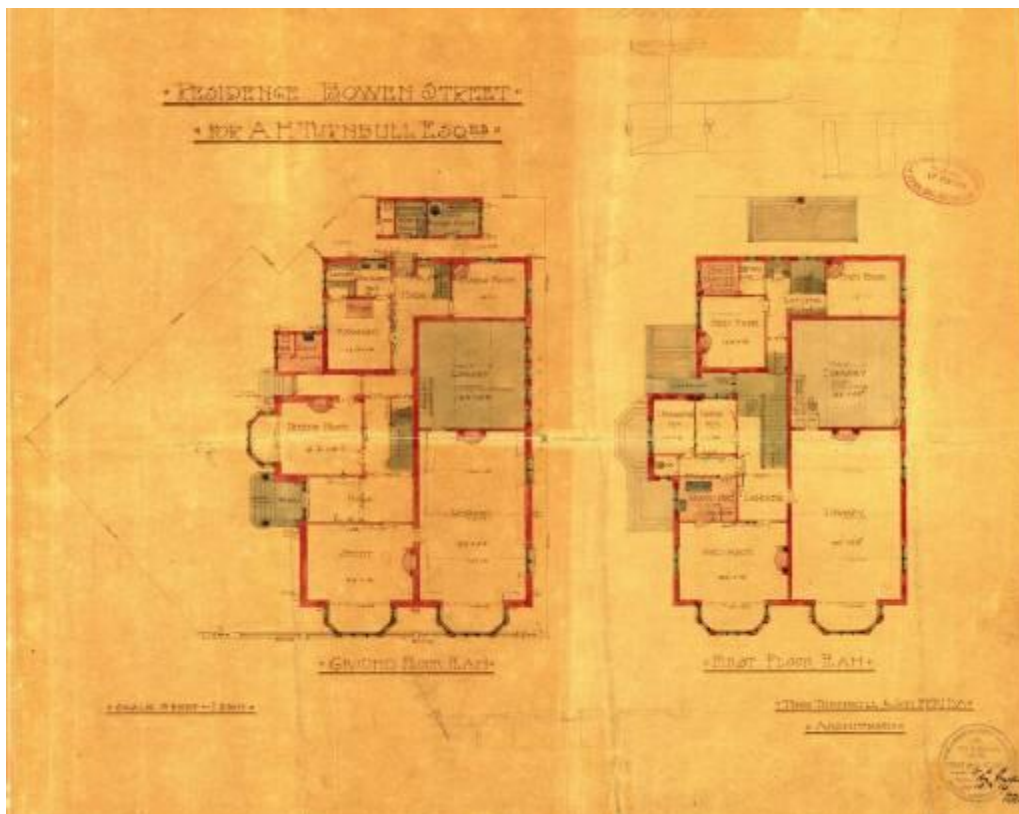
Circa 1930 exterior of Turnbull House, Bowen Street. Image: WCC Archives 00138:0:13512



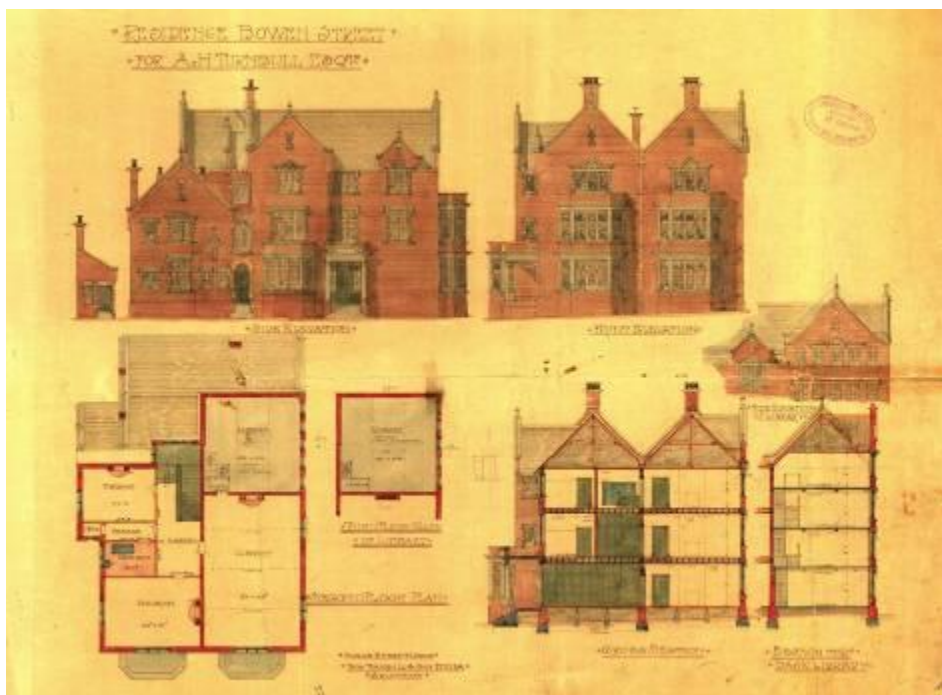
1978-1979 image shows the building in the years when the original brick northern gables were replaced with lightweight fibreboard and the others by hipped roofs.
Image: Deric Bircham WCC Archives ref 00161:0:17 Q2 Turnbull House



Turnbull House. Photographed by Rachel Connolly 25/05/2010. Copyright NZ Historic Places Trust



1916 plans of the ground and first floor of Turnbull House, note that the four large reception rooms on the ground and first floors are all noted as “Library”, and that the “Study” on the ground floor is larger than the “Dining Room”, any guests that visited Turnbull were obviously entertained in the library and study areas. Image: Turnbull and Son, WCC Archives ref 00053_187_10249.



1916 plans of the second and third floor, and front and side elevations. Note again that the largest rooms are denoted as “Library”. Image: Turnbull and Son, WCC Archives ref 00053_187_10249.

1.2 Timeline

Pre-1863	Elibank was constructed with a street frontage to Wellington Terrace and the other to Kumutoto (Bowen) Street.
1869	Walter & Alexandrina Turnbull (nee Horsburgh) purchased Elibank.
1916	Construction of the new house/library for Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull
28 June 1918	A.H. Turnbull died
28 June 1920	Alexander Turnbull Library opened to the public
1950	Additions and strengthening works “designed but not executed”
1955-57	Major structural work carried out including removal of gables. The two north facing brick gables were replaced with lightweight cement sheet on timber framing, the smaller brick gables were replaced with hipped roofs. An exterior steel frame was installed. Office, reading room & toilet facilities were re-fitted / added and a sprinkler system installed.
1973	Alexander Turnbull Library moved to new premises
1975	The Crown leased the building to WCC who subleased it to the Turnbull House Committee (later the Turnbull House Council)
1990	Ownership transferred from the State Services Commission to the Department of Conservation
1994	The building was re-roofed, and most of the original external features (including the brick gables) were rebuilt.

1.3 Architect

Thomas Turnbull and Son.

Turnbull and Son architects was founded by Thomas Turnbull (1824-1907) who was born in Scotland and trained under David Bryce, Her Majesty's Architect for Scotland. Turnbull moved to Melbourne in 1851 and then to San Francisco in circa 1860 where he became interested in earthquake resistant design, particularly for brick masonry buildings. He arrived in New Zealand in 1871, established a thriving business of which his son William became a partner in 1891.¹⁹ Thomas Turnbull is noted for the significant part he played in the transformation of the Wellington CBD from a town of two storey timber buildings to a city of "substantial masonry buildings."²⁰ Thomas Turnbull was a prolific architect and the many buildings that he designed include: -

- St Peter's Willis Street (1879)
- St John's Willis Street (1885)
- Former National Mutual Building (1883-84)

Thomas Turnbull & Son from 1891 – 1907 when both Thomas and William Turnbull were in partnership, buildings include: -

- General Assembly Library (1899)
- Commercial/Retail Building 289-291 Cuba St (1900)
- Fletcher's Building 2-6 Willis St (1900)
- Former Bank of New Zealand Head Office (1901)
- McGuire Building 168-174 Cuba St (1901)
- Dr Henry Pollen's House, Boulcott Street (1902) - French Renaissance style
- Masonic Hotel, 97-99 Cuba Street (demolished in 1970s) (1903)
- Antrim House, Wellington (1905)
- Wellington Workingmen's Club Building 107 Cuba Street (Building 1: 1904)

William Turnbull continued in practice after the death of his father in 1907 and retained the name of Thomas Turnbull and Son. William Turnbull was also a skilful designer and responsible for many of Wellington's "best and most convincing revivalist buildings"²¹ and these include: -

- Dr McGavin's house and surgery cnr Willis and Ghuznee Street (1907) – half-timbered Tudor style
- Whitcoulls Building 312-316 Lambton Quay (1907-8)
- Wellington Workingmen's Club Building 107 Cuba Street (Building 2: 1908)
- Kirkcaldie and Stains Department Store Façade 165-169 Lambton Quay (1909)
- House for A Blacklock, 60 Tinakori Road (1910)
- Woolstore, 268 Thorndon Quay (1910)
- Turnbull House, Bowen Street (1916) – Scottish Baronial style
- Northland Fire Station (1930)
- Free Ambulance Building, Cable Street (1932) – Art Deco style

¹⁹ NZHPT professional biographies,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=221>, site inactive

²⁰ Cochran C. 1991, Turnbull House Conservation Plan, Department of Conservation, Wellington p.19

²¹ Cochran C. 1991, Turnbull House Conservation Plan, Department of Conservation, Wellington p.21

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

Turnbull House is an excellent example of a British purpose-built gentlemen's residence and library. Designed in a plain Queen Anne revivalist style, it has been compared to a "Jacobean grange", "Morris's Kelmscott Manor", and in the "steep gables perhaps a touch of Scottish Baronial [style architecture]."²² The house is three storeys in height and features fine face-work of English bond brickwork, with window lintels and gable parapets in cement render. The original gables were removed in 1955 – 7 and rebuilt in 1994 to the original design.

The interlocking gables of the main roof and smaller wings of the building are one of its outstanding features. Each gable has been treated as an entity, with a well-modelled parapet, finial, and small lancet window inset. The windows have been grouped into bays, rising over two storeys on the front, or are set into well-defined square lintels with an elegant label mould above. The windows are multi-paned timber casements, painted white while the entrance porch is covered by a segmental roof supported by Tuscan columns.

The construction is load-bearing brick masonry, with reinforced concrete foundations and piles, and timber floors. The roof is clad in Welsh slate.

The house was originally split into two parts: on the western side, the book collection was divided between spacious rooms on each of the three floors, with a four storey stack room, while the eastern side was used as living quarters by Turnbull and his domestic staff. The room layout has been preserved, along with much original interior detail, although the top stack room was removed in 1955.

Turnbull House occupies a prominent site adjacent to the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area and is the finest piece of architecture on Bowen Street.

2.2 Materials²³

Brick walls; concrete foundations and stack-room floors; all other floors are timber; timber framed roof covered with Welsh slate tiles; copper gutters and downpipes.

Internal finishes include rimu and mahogany panelling and joinery; Takaka marble fire surround by well-known Wellington stonemason, R.S. Lithgow.

2.3 Setting

Turnbull House has high townscape value, and provides a strong contrast in terms of scale, colour, texture and materiality to the surrounding, often modern high-rise /curtain wall, office buildings that are its nearest neighbours.

The building is set within a parliamentary / civil service precinct and can be seen in conjunction with a diverse range of parliament-themed buildings such as the

²² E.H. McCormick quoted in Cochran C. 1991, Turnbull House Conservation Plan, Department of Conservation, Wellington p.21; Chris Cochran also notes that an earlier design for the building survives and shows a similar floor plan, but with Classical styled façades.

²³ Cochran C. 1991, Turnbull House Conservation Plan, Department of Conservation, Wellington p.23

Parliament Buildings (1922), the Beehive (1977), the wooden Government Buildings (1876), and the Cenotaph (1931). Turnbull House is a key part of the setting for the Cenotaph and it provides an appropriately scaled background for this nationally significant war memorial.

Turnbull House is a prominent feature of Bowen Street, and the building retains a small area of lawn to the eastern elevation where the main entrance doors are located. This allows the main façade, along with the north (street) façade to be viewed from the key transport route along Bowen Street, and provides a set back for the large modern office buildings that now surround Turnbull House.

3.0 References

Clare, Barry. "Restoration planned for Turnbull House", *Evening Post*, 2 May 1995

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McLean, G. 1988, Historic Wellington Walking Tour, Reed Books, Auckland WCC Archives

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"Turnbull House Won't Be Demolished", undated newspaper article from the 1970s [held in WCC file for Turnbull House]

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Other sources

“Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull” Te Ara website, accessed July 2012
<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2t53/1>

“Application to the New Zealand Lottery Grants Board: Environmental and Heritage Fund (Community Facilities Fund)” Department of Conservation Lottery Grants Board Application c.1993

“Conserving Capital’s heritage” [article held on WCC file, presumably published by the NZHPT in c.1993 – 1994]

“Funding sought for Turnbull House”, *Evening Post*, 18/2/92

“Restoration planned for Turnbull House”, *Evening Post*, 2 May 1995

“The Alexander Turnbull Library” *NAC Airline Review*, No.63 1973.

“Turnbull House restoration nearly finished”, *The Dominion*, 13 July 1995

NZHPT Field Record Form dated 1981 and updated in 1982

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 building is a good example of a large, early 20th century, domestic residence, and was built for a wealthy and eccentric bibliophile. It was designed by, William Turnbull, a prominent local architect who was known for his skill in the design of “Revivalist-style” buildings.

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 building has significant townscape value for the contrast between its scale, colour and texture, and the neighbouring modern high-rise buildings. It has, as such, become a local landmark.

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, with its association with the National Library, can be seen as part of a group of parliament / civil service themed buildings in the immediate vicinity.

Historic Value:

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

The building has exceptional historic and cultural value as the home and library of Alexander Horsburgh Turnbull. Turnbull bequeathed to the country his collection of 55,000 books and manuscripts and this was housed in the building until the early 1970s. The building remains in use as a community venue.

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

The building has considerable social value for the role it has played since 1975 in providing space for a wide variety of community groups.

Scientific Value:

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

The site has archaeological value for the pre-1900 human activity on site and is part of Central City NZAA R27/270

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

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

Social Value:

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

The building and its original collection is held in high public esteem and this can be demonstrated by the campaign to prevent its demolition in the 1970s.

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?

Turnbull House has had significant recent work to reinstate elements of the façade removed in the 1950s and is now a good facsimile of the original. The building is now approaching its centenary (in 2016) and makes a strong contribution to the sense of place and continuity in the otherwise ever-changing streetscape of Bowen Street.

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 building has a rare historic association to the establishment of the National Library of New Zealand

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

The building is a good representative example of a Queen Ann Revivalist house designed by a prominent local architect

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 exterior of the building retains considerable areas of authentic building material (with the exception of the brick gables that were rebuilt in the 1990s). The building interior is more representative of the 1957 upgrade of the Alexander Turnbull Library and has merit for that association.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

The building is of national significance.

4.0 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	
B: Physical values	Significant
(i) Archaeological	Y
(ii) Architectural	Y
(iii) Townscape	Y
(iv) Group	Y
(v) Surroundings	
(vi) Scientific	
(vii) Technological	
(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



1863 photograph of Lambton Quay with Elibank in the background.
 “View from Wellington Harbour. Shows Lambton Quay, the Vicarage on the hill, the Wallace's (house) in Hill Street, the Bolton Street Cemetery and Golder's Hill at right; the Star boating shed in the centre; and Brandon's Corner at right. Elibank in background. Taken by unidentified photographer.” Image: Alexander Turnbull Library ID: 1/4-019548-F



1930s Aerial view of Parliament grounds and buildings. Kate Shepard Place [Sydney Street East] and Aitken Street are in foreground, looking south to Bowen Street and Lambton Quay. Notable landmarks are Thistle Inn, Hotel Cecil, Sydney Street Preparatory School and Kindergarten, the Government Buildings, Saint Andrews on the Terrace and Turnbull House. WCC Archives ref: 00138:0:10341



1920 Royal Visit, elevated view of Parliament grounds showing crowds gathered to welcome the Prince of Wales with a view towards the north end of Lambton Quay and Turnbull House. WCC Archives ref 00138:0:13705



1920s Quinton's Corner', Bowen Street and Lambton Quay. Image: FG Barker WCC
archives ref 00138:0:1427



Circa 1930 Interior of the reading room, Turnbull House, Bowen Street. Image: WCC
Archives ref 00138:0:13513

Reg number	Name/ title	Brief description	Format	Date range
00053:18 7: 10249	27 Bowen Street [25 Bowen Street], dwelling	Applicant: Campbell and Burke. Owner: Alexander H Turnbull. Architect: Thomas Turnbull & Son. Note: Permit does not include any documentation. As well as original plans submitted envelope also contains copies of Public Works Department plans for strengthening work in the mid-1950s.	Building Permit/ Consent	1916
00060:38 : 1467	25 Bowen Street, toilet area	Note: consent is for Turnbull House.	Building Permit/ Consent	09 Jun 1994
SR Code	SR Type	SRI Description	SRI Status	Current Updated
8902490	Bldg Cons<500K	Extend Drains., Site Address is 25 Bowen St	Completed	23/05/1991
1467	Bldg Cons<500K	Plumbing Alteration, Site Address is 25 BOWEN ST	Completed	7/06/1996
9200466	Property Featur	BUILDING HERITAGE ITEM (DISTRICT PLAN): Details migrated from RHS #466, (Restrictions and Hazards System - RHS System 1991-2006) on 28-06-2006	To be verified	20/01/1995
29711	Bldg Cons<500K	Additions and alterations to existing buildings - ground floor alterations.	Completed	3/12/1997
43913	Bldg Cons<500K	Office fitout	Completed	6/09/1999
45341	Bldg Cons<500K	Additions and alterations - office fitout level 11 25 Bowen Street	Completed	9/09/1999
160340	Bdg StrengthInv	Notice Exp 3/2/2023	Notice Issued	1/10/2009