

Lilburn House

22 Ascot Street



Summary of heritage significance

- The Lilburn House is of architectural value as an early and highly authentic example of post war New Zealand Modernist architecture that remains in near original condition.
- The Lilburn House is of significant historical value, principally for its association with Douglas Lilburn, a figure of national importance in New Zealand's musical history. During his residence in the house, Lilburn continued to be a primary influence on the development of New Zealand music, and also began pioneering New Zealand compositions of electronic music.
- The Lilburn House is held in high public esteem, particularly by those who have been influenced by Lilburn and his contributions to the development of New Zealand music. The importance of the house is demonstrated by its purchase by the Lilburn Residence Trust for use as New Zealand's first residence for composers.

District Plan:	Map 15, 18, reference 422
Legal Description:	Lots 2 & 3 DP 12094
Heritage Area:	N/A – Thorndon Character Area
HPT Listed:	Category I, reference 7645
Archaeological Site:	Unknown risk
Other Names:	
Key physical dates:	Built: 1951
Architect / Builder:	Architect: Frederich Schwarzkopf
Former uses:	Residential
Current uses:	Residential

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

The modest residence at 22 Ascot Street has significant historic value, principally for its long association with Douglas Lilburn, a figure of national importance in New Zealand's musical history, as well as for its setting in the wider historical landscape of Thorndon. It has a high social value due to its association with Lilburn and his music, and has considerable ongoing amenity values as the Lilburn Residence Trust's home for a composer in residence. It is an early and authentic example of post war New Zealand Modernist design and remains in near original condition. It possesses rarity value as one of only two houses known to have been designed by the architect Frederick Schwarzkopf. The setting of the house, including the rambling gardens, remain in the same condition as Lilburn had them prior to his death, adding significantly to the heritage value of the house.

The house was originally designed and constructed for civil servant Richard Collins, who had purchased the two sections in 1951. Collins and his wife Barbara commissioned Austrian refugee architect Frederick Schwarzkopf to design the house. Schwarzkopf and his wife had come to New Zealand in 1940 due to the Nazi occupation and the fact that the couple had been placed in a concentration camp from 1939-1940. Once in New Zealand Schwarzkopf was employed as a structural engineer by the Housing department, which did limit his ability to take on private commissions. It is not known how he came to design the house for the Collins', particularly as his only other known private residence was for himself in Margaret Street, Wadestown. Both he and his wife suffered lingering trauma associated with their wartime experiences and had ongoing health complaints which culminated in their joint suicide at their Wadestown home on the 25 September 1961.

The Modernist single storey house was completed in 1951 for a cost of £2800, and the Collins' stayed in the home until 1961 when Barbara was pregnant with the couple's fourth child. They were reluctant to extend the house to accommodate their growing family because it would destroy its character. With this in mind they had no choice but to sell.

Renowned composer Douglas Lilburn (1915-2001) was the purchaser. He had previously owned a home in Paekakariki following his move to Wellington in 1949 to take up a position in the Department of Music at Victoria University. He greatly enjoyed the coastal environment which was a source of inspiration for his compositions, but he found it to be too isolated from the Wellington music scene. He had then moved in 1953 to 365 Tinakori Road, but here he encountered the opposite problem – he encountered hostility from neighbours who did not appreciate his piano practice.

The Ascot Street house suited his needs perfectly, placed as it is on a large section and away from other houses. Although it was private, it was not isolated, and Lilburn had many visitors from the city. His students were always welcome and it became a 'Mecca for composers, musicians, and artists alike'. The house was a hub of cultural activity for a great many years.

¹ For extended history see: Russell Murray, 'Lilburn House – 22 Ascot Street', (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 53, 2005).

His move to Ascot Street coincides with his “second phase of musical output”, when he pioneered compositions for electronic music at Victoria University. It appears that the house and garden provided excellent conditions for the creation of this music, and although he did not make any direct connections, Lilburn did suggest that surroundings environments “in a subtle way affect our manner of listening” and “impress themselves in our minds in a way that will ultimately give rise to forms of musical expression”. Given later remarks about the house and garden it is fair to suggest that they played an important role in his life and compositions.

The home of his close friend Rita Angus, with whom he had a long and mutually supportive friendship and a brief relationship, was nearby. Lilburn had romantic relationships with men throughout his life but kept his homosexuality private except among friends. Later in life his confidential submission on the Homosexual Law Reform Bill in 1985 derided ‘thunderers about perversion’ and suggested that outlawing homosexuality was as rational as legislating ‘against rabbits and blackberries in hedges.’²

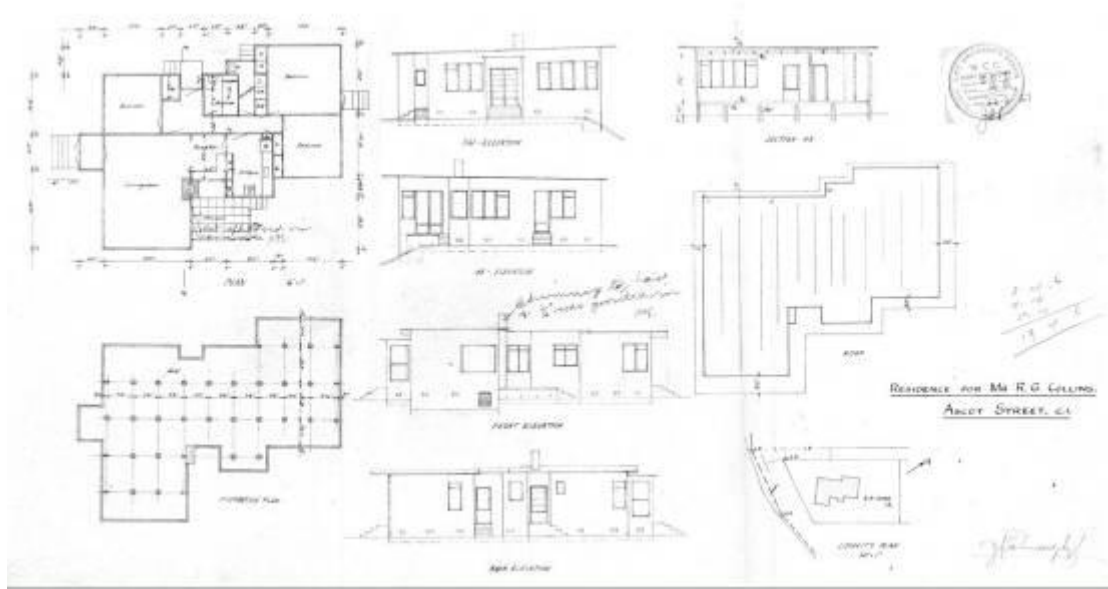
Lilburn had put some thought in his later years into what should be done with the property after his death. As early as 1973 he raised the idea of using the house and land as an arts centre with some new buildings. Later he explored other options including gifting it to the university or turning it into a guesthouse for visiting researchers at the National Library and Alexander Turnbull Library. He wanted to remain in control of the property until his death and the various proposals came to nothing. He was, however, adamant that the property was not to be unsympathetically ‘developed’.

Given these difficulties no plans had been finalised upon his death in 2001. The Lilburn Trust was created to support and foster New Zealand music composition, and the trustees considered the sale of the property as the best way to achieve this. However, a separate organisation called the Lilburn Residence Trust was formed in 2004 to purchase the property for a composer in residence scheme. By August 2005 sufficient funds were raised and transferred to the LRT.

The house has remained remarkably unaltered since its construction in 1951. Lilburn “...enjoyed it for 33 years, with small maintenance costs other than a new roof” which was replaced using the same design and materials around 1980.

² Rebecca O’Brien and Rebecca Chrystal, ‘Lilburn House – 22 Ascot Street, Thorndon, Wellington’, Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga, 27 November 2020, accessed 11 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/7645>

1.2 Timeline of modifications



1951 22 Ascot Street, dwelling (00056:403:B31032)

1980 Building alteration – roof replaced

1.3 Architect

Frederick Schwarzkopf (1881-1961)

2.0 Physical description³

2.1 Architecture

The Lilburn House is a representative example of a style of Modernist residential architecture that evolved in New Zealand during the 1940s and 50s. Partly inspired by new building work in Europe and America, partly driven by pre-war Modernist ideals, and partly informed by émigré designers escaping conflict and post war-conditions in Europe, a small but highly visible Modernist architectural style/movement arose in New Zealand during the early post-war years. Key players, including group architects, Vernon Brown, and others set out down the path of discovering a localised version of Modernist residential architecture and generated a number of quite distinctive and radical, for New Zealand, houses.

These houses showcased modernist themes including open-plan communal spaces and were built to foster the direct relationship between house and site/garden. Many of these new designs featured a sense of economy and efficiency of construction suited to the strained post-war economic climate. While Schwarzkopf is known for only two houses, the Lilburn house fits neatly into this post-war NZ Modernist stream of work.

The approach to the house is up a meandering path from Ascot Street. The Lilburn House presents a simple, but striking appearance – the wide white eaves of a flat roof overhang the creosoted black bevel-back weatherboard walls where the timber

³ Russell Murray, 'Lilburn House – 22 Ascot Street.'

joinery and trims are picked out again in white; the whole set against the rich greens of the enclosing garden. A terrace provides outdoor space at the east side, providing a transition between the living area and the main lawn. Beyond the main lawn the site is substantially covered in mature plantings. A small shed is located just off the north end of the lawn.

The interior plan is arranged around a central core of utility spaces, with three bedrooms towards the south end of the house and open plan living and dining letting out on to the terrace at the north end. The rooms include some built in furniture that still remains.

2.2 Materials

- Timber
- Profiled metal roof
- Creosoted black bevel-back weatherboard walls

2.3 Setting

The Lilburn House is set amidst a rambling garden on the east side of the gully between Thorndon and the Botanic Gardens overlooking Sydney and Bowen Streets. The background of the house is one of mature bush and neither the presence of neighbouring houses nor the heavy traffic on nearby Bowen Street or Tinakori Road is evident. The site itself is on a double section; with the house on the front section and the greater part of the garden on the back section. It includes the original gardener's shed and a large number of mature trees and plants. The lush garden envelops the section and house and provides glimpses of the world beyond, while admitting sunlight and air to the house and main lawn.

The house is set in the centre of one of Wellington's oldest residential areas and the neighbours of the Lilburn house are predominantly old workers cottages, although Sydney Street below has been developed to some extent. The visual character of the area is wooded, with the houses set amongst the trees.

The broader setting includes the Parliamentary precinct east along Bowen Street, the Botanic Gardens to the South, and the residential areas of Thorndon to the west and north, this includes the Tinakori Road Heritage area and the Thorndon Character Area.

Sources

O'Brien, Rebecca. *Lilburn House – 22 Ascot Street*. Historic Places Trust unpublished registration report. 28 April 2005.

O'Brien, Rebecca and Rebecca Chrystal. 'Lilburn House – 22 Ascot Street, Thorndon, Wellington'. Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga. 27 November 2020, accessed 11 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/7645>

Murray, Russell. 'Lilburn House – 22 Ascot Street.' Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 53, 2005.

Wellington City Archive

00056:403:B31032

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 Lilburn House is of architectural value as an early and highly authentic example of post war New Zealand Modernist architecture that remains in near original condition.

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 is situated in Thorndon, one of Wellington's oldest residential areas. Although it is largely obscured by the garden, the house and gardens are of streetscape value for the contribution they make to Ascot Street, adding a sense of contrast between the Modernist Lilburn house and the pre turn of the century workers cottages that make up the area.

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?*

Historic Value:

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

The Lilburn House is of significant historical value, principally for its association with Douglas Lilburn, a figure of national importance in New Zealand's musical history. During his residence in the house, Lilburn continued to be a primary influence on the development of New Zealand music, and also began pioneering New Zealand compositions of electronic music.

Association: *Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme,*

pattern, phase, or activity?

Scientific Value:

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

Risk Unknown – House is post 1900 but in an area known to have been settled by the 1880s as well as the area having been associated with Maori pre 1840. The likelihood of accidental discovery is high.

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

The Lilburn house has significant educative value, not only as an early example of Modernist architecture in post-war New Zealand, but as a home for future composers, making the purpose of this house the support and protection of New Zealand music.

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 Lilburn House is held in high public esteem, particularly by those who have been influenced by Lilburn and his contributions to the development of New Zealand music. The importance of the house is demonstrated by its purchase by the Lilburn Residence Trust for use as New Zealand's first residence for composers.

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?*

The Lilburn house was described as a 'Mecca for composers, musicians, and artists alike' and continues to have significant commemorative and cultural importance to the musical and artistic community, as well as the wider community of New Zealanders.

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?*

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

The Lilburn House is a significant part of Thorndon and remains of importance to the Thorndon community as well as to the musical and artistic communities.

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

As one of only two houses designed by Schwarzkopf, the Lilburn house has rarity value. It is also a relatively early example of a post-war Modernist house in Wellington, reflecting the key features of the Modern movement.

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

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 Lilburn houses has had few modifications since its construction in 1951, it has significant authenticity and integrity of materials, design, and craftsmanship as well as setting.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

The Lilburn house is nationally significant with a number of internationally significant associations as it is integrally associated with one of New Zealand's most respected and foremost composers. The reference to the house in his work, and the influence that the setting had upon his work, which is acknowledged both nationally and internationally, make this house outstanding in its significance. As an early example of Modernist architecture and one of only two houses designed by Frederick Schwarzkopf in New Zealand it is also nationally significant.

3.0 Appendix

2021 - Review against revised heritage assessment criteria

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

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	
(v) Surroundings	Y
(vi) Scientific	Y
(vii) Technological	
(viii) Integrity	Y
(ix) Age	
C: Social values	Significant
(i) Sentiment	Y
(ii) Recognition	Y
(iii) Sense of place	
D: Tangata whenua values	
E: Rarity	Significant
F: Representativeness	

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*