

## **Wellington Free Ambulance Building (Former)**

5 – 9 Cable Street



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

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### **Summary of heritage significance**

- The former Wellington Free Ambulance building is a fine example of an Art Deco civic building. It is notable for its distinctive, external, sculptural form, and for the quality of its internal Art Deco fittings, spaces and decorative schemes.
- The Wellington Free Ambulance is the second largest road ambulance service provider in New Zealand, and provides a distinct regional service. The building was the first headquarters for the service, and was the first purpose-built ambulance stations to be built in New Zealand.
- The building is held in high public esteem, and this is evident by the public outcry when the building was proposed for demolition in the 1980s, and by its subsequent protection by a Heritage Order.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 47
Legal Description:	Lot 1 DP 337194
Heritage Area:	N/A
HPT Listed:	Category 1, 3644 Heritage Order <del>issued</del> (HP 329/1992) Board resolved but Resolution not effected. NO Heritage Order
Archaeological Site:	NZAA R27/266 – Historic reclamations
Other Names:	St Johns
Key physical dates:	Built: 1932-33
Architect / Builder:	Architect: William Turnbull
Former uses:	Health Services – Ambulance Station
Current uses:	Commercial – Bar/restaurant
Earthquake Prone Status:	Outside EQP Policy – SR 268498

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

The former Wellington Free Ambulance Building, designed by William Turnbull and constructed between 1932 and 1933, was the first purpose-built Free Ambulance building in New Zealand. Constructed in a distinctive and functional Art Deco style this building served its original purpose for over 60 years.

Although St John Ambulance is currently the dominant road ambulance service in New Zealand, the Wellington Free Ambulance is a regional service that provides coverage to Wellington, the Wairarapa and the Kapiti Coast.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the century Wellington city was served by three horse drawn ambulances which had replaced the previous 'Ashford Litters' – large hand wheeled wooden stretchers. Horse drawn ambulances were then replaced by motor vehicles, but these vehicles were privately owned and a payment was required before a patient would be transported to the hospital. The Free Ambulance movement was established after Wellington's Mayor, Charles Norwood, witnessed a traffic accident in Lambton Quay.<sup>2</sup> He based the Wellington service upon the Australian system and brought Tom Dolan, a senior ambulance superintendant in Newcastle, to Wellington, to explain how the service could work.<sup>3</sup>

The Wellington Free Ambulance began on the 9 November 1927, six bearers were employed, two ambulances were transferred from the Hospital board, and two more were donated by Norwood. The service was set up in the Naval Artillery Boat Shed, which later became the Wellington Rowing Club building. The hall, however, proved to be unsatisfactory and a new building was sought.<sup>4</sup>

In 1932, the City Council gave the Wellington Free Ambulance land on Jervois Quay at a peppercorn rental to build a new station. The WCC brokered a complex agreement which saw the Wellington Rowing Club move into the old Naval Artillery Boat Shed, to free up the land now occupied by the Free Ambulance Building. The old rowing-club boatsheds were removed and a new building, designed by William Turnbull, was constructed. Turnbull originally planned to design the building in brick in the Classical style, but following the Napier earthquake he altered the plans, designing the building in the modern, inexpensive, Art Deco style used extensively in the Napier rebuild.<sup>5</sup>

The builder was Alfred Lemmon and his tendered price for the construction was £12,800. The building was funded through private donations, and despite conflicts between Turnbull and engineer S.T. Silver over the reinforcement in the concrete and delays, the building was completed and opened on the 8<sup>th</sup> of March 1933.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Swarbrick. 'Ambulance services - Ambulance services in the 2000s', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 13-Jul-12 URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/ambulance-services/page-2>

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca O'Brien, *Wellington Free Ambulance Building: 5 – 9 Cable Street* (Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report), December 5, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Wellington City Council, "5-9 Cable Street," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), CABL 1.

<sup>4</sup> Wellington City Council, '5-9 Cable Street'.

<sup>5</sup> O'Brien, *Wellington Free Ambulance Building: 5 – 9 Cable Street*.

<sup>6</sup> Wellington City Council, '5-9 Cable Street'

The building operated as the WFA's headquarters for the next 61 years. Fundraising by the Ladies Auxiliary and support from local businessmen such as Charles Odlin, original owner of the adjoining Odlin's building, allowed the service to expand to cover the wider Wellington region. True to Norwood's original vision, the service remained free of charge.

In the early 1990s, with Lambton Harbour Management seeking to redevelop the Wellington Waterfront for a proposed hotel and with changes in traffic flow likely to affect ambulance operations, the service decided to move to new premises in Thorndon. The building was vacated in January 1994 and converted to a bar, and then was fitted out as a theatre space. During this time Harbour management sought to demolish the Free Ambulance building to make way for a proposed casino hotel. Strong public opposition stopped this from going ahead and heritage protection (in the form of a Heritage Order) was secured. The building now houses the popular St Johns Bar and Restaurant.



Wellington Free Ambulance building, Cable Street, Wellington. Negatives of the Evening Post newspaper. Ref: EP-6859-1/2-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23063941>



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Turnbull, William, b. 1868 (Architect): Wellington Free Ambulance building at night, Cable Street, Wellington. New Zealand Free Lance: Photographic prints and negatives. Ref: 1/2-099992-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.  
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23228068>



## 1.2 Timeline of modifications



WCA – 00472\_1\_2-04

1932 – 1933	Building Constructed
1946	Building modification – Additions and alterations (unknown)
1964	Building modification
1974	Building modification – Demolition (5 Cable Street)
1986	Building modification
1998	Building modification
1999	Building modification
2000	Building modification – Fit out for theatre space
2006	Building modification – Refurbishment, structural strengthening of the existing building shell and interior. New mezzanine Level 1 floor area

## 1.3 Occupation history

1932 – 1994	Wellington Free Ambulance
1994-2000	Various temporary bar/restaurant
2006 – present	St John's Bar and restaurant

## **1.4 Architect<sup>7</sup>**

### **Turnbull, William (1868-1941)**

William Turnbull (1868-1941) entered the architectural office of his father Thomas (1825-1907) in 1882, and received a professional education from him. In 1890, William visited Melbourne and Sydney and was engaged in the office of J A Gordon, a Melbourne architect who at that time was engaged in the design of several major commercial buildings including the Melbourne (now Victoria) Markets. In 1891 William returned to Wellington and was admitted into partnership in the firm of Thomas Turnbull and Son. This was one of the foremost architectural practices in the city at the turn of the century and it continued after Thomas Turnbull's death in 1907. William became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1906, designing many important early twentieth century buildings in Wellington such as 12 Boulcott Street (1902), Turnbull House (1918), and the Wellington Free Ambulance Building (1932). The range and variety of his adaptation of architectural styles show him to be fully versed in virtually every contemporary architectural style and to have special skills and flair for masonry design.

## **2.0 Physical description**

### **2.0 Architecture**

Charles Norwood's brief to the architect William Turnbull was to construct a building that was distinctive, modern, and functional. It is clear that the task was admirably conceived and carried out, and the building survives today as one of the finest purpose-built Art Deco buildings in the city.

This building is remarkable for its sculptural aspect, demonstrating to advantage the clean and uncluttered lines that are characteristic of Art Deco. A feature of the building is the emphasis on the vertical which can be seen in the elongated window recesses and vertical moulding and banding on the façade. The treatment of the stepped parapets on the front and back elevations, and the general massing of the building, are subtle suggestions of the Art Deco influence of the building.

The interiors demonstrate a concern for natural ventilation and natural lighting with large open spaces and a skylight overhead in the former garage area. There is a wealth of Art Deco decorative detail; including plaster friezes and decorative capitals that feature Masonic insignia. Original geometric floor tiling survives along with Art Deco lampshades and wall fittings.

This building is uniquely scaled and is a distinctive landmark on the Wellington waterfront. It is a visual contrast to many of the surrounding buildings.

### **2.1 Materials**

The building is constructed with foundations of reinforced concrete, with cast in situ concrete walls, floors, and roofs over a steel frame.

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<sup>7</sup> New Zealand Historic Places Trust, Professional Biographies, "William Turnbull", accessed 10/05/2013, [http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+William+\(1868-1941\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+William+(1868-1941))

## **2.2 Setting**

The distinctive Art Deco architectural style, and its prominent location on one of Wellington's main arterial routes, gives this building considerable townscape and setting value.

The Wellington waterfront is a significant and popular open space, surrounded by a number of important heritage and modern commercial buildings. The Former Free Ambulance together with the adjacent Odolins Building and Shed 22, and the nearby John Chambers Building, Wellington Rowing Club and Star Boating Club create a harbour edge precinct of considerable heritage value.

## **3.0 Sources**

Deco Danny, 'Flickr', accessed 10/05/2013,  
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/decodanny/6107928345/in/set-72157627581546966>

O'Brien, Rebecca. *Wellington Free Ambulance Building: 5 – 9 Cable Street*. Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report. December 5, 2002.

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. "William Turnbull". *Professional Biographies*. accessed 10/05/2013,  
[http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+William+\(1868-1941\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+William+(1868-1941))

Wellington City Council. "5-9 Cable Street," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001.

## **Wellington City Archives**

WCA – 00472\_1\_2-04

## **Alexander Turnbull Library**

Negatives of the Evening Post newspaper. Ref: EP-6859-1/2-G.  
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23063941>

New Zealand Free Lance : Photographic prints and negatives. Ref: 1/2-099992-G.  
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.  
<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23228068>



## 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 former Wellington Free Ambulance building is a fine example of an Art Deco civic building. It is notable for its distinctive, external, sculptural form, and for the quality of its internal Art Deco fittings, spaces and decorative schemes. It was the first purpose-built ambulance station in New Zealand.

**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 distinctive Art Deco architectural style, and its prominent location on one of Wellington's main arterial routes, gives this building considerable townscape and setting value.

**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 Former Free Ambulance together with the adjacent Odlins Building and Shed 22, and the nearby John Chambers Building, Wellington Rowing Club and Star Boating Club create a harbour edge precinct of considerable heritage value.

#### **Historic Value:**

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

This building is associated with two important people in the history of Wellington. The first is Sir Charles Norwood, who established the Wellington Free Ambulance. The second is William Turnbull, one of Wellington's most prominent architects.

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

The Wellington Free Ambulance is the second largest road ambulance service provider in New Zealand, and provides a distinct regional service. The building was the first headquarters for the service, and was the first purpose-built ambulance stations to be built in New Zealand.

#### **Scientific Value:**

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

This building is a part of the NZAA R27/266 – Historic reclamations archaeological area.

**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?*

This building is of significant technological value due to its foundations of reinforced concrete, with cast in situ concrete walls, floors, and roofs over a steel frame. This design was influenced by the 1931 Hawkes Bay Earthquakes and the innovations that developed following that event.

**Social Value:**

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

The building is held in high public esteem, and this is evident by the public outcry when the building was proposed for demolition in the 1980s, and by its subsequent protection by a Heritage Order.

**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 was the home of the Wellington Free Ambulance for over 60 years and has had few significant modifications carried out. Although the service has moved to new premises, the building continues to contribute to a sense of community identity, and sense of place and continuity in Wellington city.

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

The emergency services have a highly recognised public profile, so it is not surprising that the former home of the Wellington Free Ambulance service continues to be held in high public regard and as a focus of community connection.

The building has an ongoing use as the 'St Johns Bar', an extremely popular establishment on the Waterfront.

**Level of cultural heritage significance**

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

This building is of high cultural heritage significance as the first purpose-built ambulance building in New Zealand.

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

This building is a good example of Art Deco in Wellington, being one of three large scale Art Deco buildings on major arterial routes through the city (the others are the Waterloo Hotel and the Hotel St George).

**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?*

This building retains authenticity and integrity as there have been few significant modifications made to the fabric of the building.

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

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

The former Wellington Free Ambulance building is a nationally important building as the first purpose-built ambulance building in New Zealand. It has regional and local significance as the former home of Wellington's regional road-ambulance service.

## 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*