

First State House 1937

12 Fife Lane



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The house at 12 Fife Lane is essentially functional, with the plainness of detailing and simplicity of form being related to the economic constraints of the time and the speed and ease of the construction. Concession to ornamentation can be seen in the window shutters, waved timber infill in the gable ends, and the multi pane windows.
- This building is the first of thousands of State Houses to be constructed in New Zealand between the 1930s and the 1970s. It symbolises a significant period of New Zealand's social development and history. This house, at 12 Fife Lane, completed in 1937 has served as a symbol of the Labour Government and its programme based around the principle that it was the right of all New Zealanders to have decent housing.
- The first state house was constructed in materials and using techniques common to the time. There is technical interest in the design, as these houses have become an influential building style, which has been reproduced many times throughout New Zealand both for state housing, and private homes.

District Plan:	Map 7, reference 121
Legal Description:	Lot53 DP 11187
Heritage Area:	-
HPT Listed:	Category I, reference 1360
Archaeological Site:	Pre 1900 human activity associated with area; associated with several sites of significance
Other Names:	-
Key physical dates:	Built: 1937
Architect / Builder:	Builder: Higgins and Arcus
Former uses:	Residential
Current uses:	Residential
Earthquake Prone Status:	EQ Not Necessary, Outside EQ Policy – SR 269287

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

New Zealand has a long history of Government initiative housing schemes and when the first Labour Government was elected in 1935 it undertook an extensive housing scheme. This house, at 12 Fife Lane, completed in 1937 has served as a symbol of the Labour Government and its programme based around the principle that it was the right of all New Zealanders to have decent housing.

The state housing scheme was prompted by a housing shortage during the Depression exacerbated by the decline in building construction and the movement of people into cities to look for work. Those families who already resided in the cities were often in no better position to afford the New Zealand dream home complete with quarter acre section, and the increased demand on rental properties caused rental rates to skyrocket. The Labour Government, led by Michael Joseph Savage, elected in 1935 had pledged to build houses of a modern standard and comfort. The Labour Government scheme differed greatly from earlier schemes by focussing its programme on the principle that access to decent housing was a fundamental right of all New Zealanders.

The state house subdivision in Miramar was one of the first to be completed in New Zealand. The state houses were based on one of 400 different plans designed for the scheme by architects employed by the newly established Department of Housing Construction. The houses were designed to maximise the available sunlight and the interiors were arranged to promote a harmonious home life while remaining hygienic and efficient. The single storey houses, with hipped roofs clad in locally made tiles and low maintenance veneers of plastered brick such as 12 Fife Lane were constructed by private building firms and in the case of the first state house, this was the firm of Higgins and Arcus.

The house at 12 Fife Lane was the first in the subdivision to be completed and made available to state tenants. This house became the focus of government publicity for the housing scheme and an official opening ceremony was held in 1937. The opening received extensive newspaper coverage and was broadcast on national radio, and an image of Michael Joseph Savage carrying a table through the crowds into the building has reached iconic status. This ceremony was repeated at several other subdivisions when the 'first' house was completed.

The first state tenants of 12 Fife Lane were the McGregor family. David McGregor, a tram conductor, and his wife Mary had previously been living with his family in a sub-standard dwelling in Happy Valley. The McGregor's gained their new home by ballot, the system initially used to allocate state houses until complaints forced a merit system to be set in place. Security of tenure depended solely on the McGregor's ability to pay rent and care for the property. Their rent of 32s 6d per week was based on the average capital cost of their house plus maintenance and insurance requirements. It could not be raised except to cover rates and insurance unless the family were evicted.

¹ History adapted from: O'Brien, Rebecca. '12 Fife Lane – First State House', (Historic Places Trust unpublished registration report. 5 December 2002), accessed 3 September 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=1360>; and 'The first state house - state housing in New Zealand', (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012, accessed 3 September 2013, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/we-call-it-home/first-state-house>

The high standards initially set by the first Labour government meant the housing scheme was expensive to maintain. Costs rose dramatically after the Second Floor and from 1945 the tax payer began subsidising state tenants. Although the scheme had raised the national standard of living, it had failed to address the housing shortage and public discontent with the scheme escalated. In 1949 Labour lost the election to the National Party, who cut back on building state houses and promoted home ownership. From the 1950s, families were able to purchase state houses and many took advantage of this option, and in 1968 the McGregor family purchased the First State House, and the purchase reflects the changes to the Government's approach to state housing.

Following the death of David and Mary McGregor in the 1980s, their son sold the house back to the state. By this time the historical importance of the house had been recognised, in particular as a symbol of the state housing programme. The house was used to accommodate state servants on transfer and in 1987, fifty years after the McGregor's moved into the house, an anniversary celebration was held. At that time over 91,000 state houses had been built throughout New Zealand. Despite the political involvement in the celebrations, government support for state housing declined sharply. In 1991 the government indicated that no new state houses would be constructed, and apart from for limited groups, it would no longer provide housing for New Zealanders in need. By 2003 the New Zealand Housing Corporation had agreed to again build and lease houses to New Zealanders in the greatest need.

12 Fife Street is once again leased as a rental property and remains in authentic condition. This building is the first of thousands of State Houses to be constructed in New Zealand between the 1930s and the 1970s. It symbolises a significant period of New Zealand's social development and history.

1.2 Timeline of modifications (original plans could not be accessed)

1937 Original construction
1977 12 Fife Lane shed (00058:1112:C48068)

1.3 Occupation history

Not assessed

1.4 Architect

Builder: Higgins and Arcus

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The state house is essentially functional. The plainness of detailing and simplicity of form was significantly due to the economic constraints of the time, and the speed and ease of construction of the simple design. There is some ornamentation in the window shutters, waved timber infill of the gable ends, and the multi pane windows. This building served as an important prototype to the now common type of state house - the weatherboard clad, tiled roof buildings, which proved cheaper and faster to construct than the earlier version.

2.2 Materials

- Tiled roof
- Timber joinery
- Cement render

2.3 Setting

The setting of 12 Fife Lane is largely a suburban streetscape, made up of almost exclusively single storey dwellings of a similar type, most likely many of which were constructed as part of the Miramar subdivision.

3.0 Sources

O'Brien, Rebecca. '*12 Fife Lane – First State House*'. Historic Places Trust unpublished registration report. 5 December 2002. Accessed 3 September 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=1360>

'The first state house - state housing in New Zealand', (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012, accessed 3 September 2013, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/culture/we-call-it-home/first-state-house>

Wellington City Archive

1977 12 Fife Lane, shed 00058:1112:C48068

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 house at 12 Fife Lane is essentially functional, with the plainness of detailing and simplicity of form being related to the economic constraints of the time and the speed and ease of the construction. Concession to ornamentation can be seen in the window shutters, waved timber infill in the gable ends, and the multi pane windows.

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 house has townscape value for the role that it plays in the streetscape of Fife Lane, an area made up of a number of similarly styled homes.

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?*

This building is the first of over 91,000 state homes to be built in New Zealand. This house style was the prototype for future state housing developments. This is an important part of New Zealand's social development and history, which is illustrated by this group of houses.

Historic Value:

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

This building is the first of thousands of State Houses to be constructed in New Zealand between the 1930s and the 1970s. It symbolises a significant period of New Zealand's social development and history. This house, at 12 Fife Lane, completed in 1937 has served as a symbol of the Labour Government and its programme based around the principle that it was the right of all New Zealanders to have decent housing.

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 is unknown. This area is known to have been associated with pre-1900 human activity, and is associated with Maori sites of significance.

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

This house has significant educational value as it is an important representative of the social history of New Zealand. It also provides an important insight into the attitudes that were held around the home and family.

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

The first state house was constructed in materials and using techniques common to the time. There is technical interest in the design, as these houses have become an influential building style, which has been reproduced many times throughout New Zealand both for state housing, and private homes.

Social Value:

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

This building is held in high public esteem as a representative of New Zealand's early social development. The house was repurchased in 1983 by the government and restored in 1987. The house was used as a symbol by the Government for its housing programme, with the official opening featuring in Newspapers and on National radio.

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?*

The first state house is an important element of New Zealand's social development, and as a symbol of the national housing programme, the house has national cultural significance. It was the first of 91,000 state houses built between 1935 and the 1980, and contributes greatly to the sense of place and continuity in Miramar.

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?*

12 Fife Lane was the first of 91,000 state houses built between 1935 and the 1980, and is an excellent representative of these houses.

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 house has significant authenticity as it has had few modifications.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

As the first of 91,000 state houses built between 1935 and the 1980, this house is nationally significant as the first state house constructed in New Zealand. It is historically important for its place in the story of New Zealand's social development, and for its use by the Labour Government as a symbol for their housing programme. As a typical example of a state house, this house has architectural and technical values as well as educational value for what it can tell us about the attitudes that were held about the family and the home that were dominant in the 1930s.

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)		