

Massey House
126- 132 Lambton Quay



Images: Charles Collins, 2015

Note: Massey House was built in two phases, the original 1955-57 Plischke and Firth building can be seen at the right of this photo, the 1967 Firth addition can be seen to the left.

Summary of heritage significance

- Massey House is one of the most influential examples Modern Movement architecture in New Zealand. The building has aesthetic value for the sculptural treatment of its structural elements. Of particular note is the cantilevered verandah with its “polka dot” lighting scheme; the ground floor piloti; the entrance foyer; the glazing to the ground floor retail units; the bookshop interior; and the roof terrace with its sculptural service towers.
- Massey House was the precursor to the modern high-rise, curtain wall buildings that now surround it, and the building continues to make a strong positive contribution to a streetscape.
- The building has historic value for its association with the Meat and Dairy producer boards. The building is a significant work by Ernst Plischke, an influential Austrian-born architect and his partner Cedric Firth.
- The building is held in high esteem by the architectural community where it is considered to be a seminal building of the Modern Movement in New Zealand.

District Plan:	Map 17 ref 290
Legal Description:	Lot 1 DP 16589
Heritage Area:	None 2012
HPT Listed:	Historic Place Category 1 7661
Archaeological Site:	Wellington CBD
Other Names:	49 - 55 The Terrace Plunkett House, Intergen House, NZ Payroll House
Key physical dates:	1955-7 original building constructed, 1967 Cedric Firth addition to the south
Architect / Builder:	Plischke and Firth
Former uses:	Office accommodation for the Meat and Dairy Producer's Boards, with retail at ground floor
Current uses:	Commercial office building with retail at ground floor
Earthquake Prone Status:	SR 170168 Bdg StrengthInv. Section 124 Notice issued 18/06/2012. Notice Expires 15/06/2027.

Extent: Cityview GIS 2012



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

Massey House was built in 1955-7 as the joint national headquarters for both the Dairy Producer's Board and the Meat Producer's Board.¹ It was designed by Ernst Plischke and Cedric Firth in the International Style and was one of the first, and the most influential Modernist Buildings constructed in New Zealand.²

The Meat and Dairy Marketing Boards were responsible for the regulation and sale of two of the country's most successful primary exports. Meat and dairy products had, along with wool, turned New Zealand into an affluent country. The two boards were separate entities that came together in 1950 when the Dairy Board offered the Meat Board a half-share in a site on Lambton Quay. The two boards commissioned Austrian immigrant Ernst Plischke and his partner Cedric Firth to design a new building to house the head offices of both organisations. In commissioning Plischke, in particular, who was responsible for the design of the building, the organisations were deliberately seeking to make a Modern statement.³

Progress was initially very slow. It was four years before a photomontage of how the building would look was revealed to the public and another three before work began on the building.⁴ The builder was A.G. Wells Ltd (later Cubitt Wells) and the tender sum was £312,283 14s 9d. The building extended through to The Terrace, with curtain wall facades on both front and rear elevations.

Massey House, was named for former Prime Minister and farmer William Massey who was considered to be the "founder" of the Meat and Dairy Boards, and the building was opened by Prime Minister Keith Holyoake on 4 October 1957. The name was chosen via a staff competition with a prize of £25 for the winning entry. The building was not universally lauded, although Massey praised the building and influential British architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner described it as New Zealand's best major building.⁵ Many people were aware of the Modern movement's gathering influence overseas but were suspicious of its arrival in New Zealand.

An original tenant was Roy Parsons' bookshop, which remained in its largely unaltered ground floor premises until 2014. Roy and Nan Parsons had immigrated to New Zealand in 1938 and Roy Parsons managed the left-wing Wellington Co-operative Book Society's Wellington book store in 1939 before joining the RNZAF from 1942-1946. He opened a bookstore on Lambton Quay in 1947 and moved to the newly opened ground floor space at Massey House in 1958 that had been specifically designed for him by Plischke.⁶ Seresin's coffee house was set on the mezzanine floor of the bookshop, and Harry Seresin was a German refugee who was keen to bring a European lifestyle to Wellington. He was a key figure in the establishment of the Downstage Theatre. Both Parsons and Seresin were friends of Plischke.

¹ Note: this report is based on the WCC Heritage Inventory 2001 ref Lamb2 and Cochran, C. and Russell Murray, 2010. "Massey House, Lambton Quay Wellington: Conservation Plan"

² Tyler, L. 2008 "Massey House (now New Zealand Payroll House)" in Gatley, J (ed.). *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984*, Auckland University Press, Auckland.

³ Tyler L. 1997 "Modernity Arrives" in Wilson J. ed., *Zeal and Crusade - The Modern Movement in Wellington*, Te Waihora Press, Wellington p.103

⁴ Cochran, C. and Russell Murray, 2010. "Massey House, Lambton Quay Wellington: Conservation Plan"

⁵ Tyler, L. 2008 "Massey House (now New Zealand Payroll House)" in Gatley, J (ed.). *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984*, Auckland University Press, Auckland.

⁶ Cochran, C. and Russell Murray, 2010. "Massey House, Lambton Quay Wellington: Conservation Plan"

In 1967, part of the original building - a “lean-to”⁷ - was removed to allow the construction of the Manchester Unity building to the north. The adjacent Royal Hotel to the south was demolished and the Massey House building extended in exactly the same style.⁸ The building was designed by Firth as Plischke had, by then, returned to Austria. The Royal Hotel was incorporated in the new building in premises that are still occupied by a bar and restaurant.

There have been few substantial alterations to the exterior of the building and the interior of Parson’s bookshop since the late 1960s. The fine interior fit-out of the boardroom and manager’s offices on the upper levels have since been removed.⁹

The building is no longer occupied by the Meat or Dairy Boards. Both boards were caught up in the deregulation of the agriculture sector from the mid-1980s when government subsidies were phased out, and crown agencies began to charge for services including meat inspection.¹⁰ The Dairy Board, that had been the sole exporter of NZ dairy products for the 40 years from 1961 – 2001, was effectively replaced by Fonterra,¹¹ a large dairy co-operative owned by dairy farmers, and by two smaller companies that eventually became Dairy NZ in 2007.¹² The Meat Board’s official role was reduced to “quota and reserves management” under the Meat Board Act of 2004, and the marketing, promotion and “industry good functions” of both the former meat and wool boards were transferred to an entity now known as Beef + Lamb New Zealand.¹³

The building appears to be let to various retail, café and commercial tenants and is currently named “Intergen House” after Intergen, an Australasian business consultancy.

⁷ Kernohan D. 1989, Wellington’s New Buildings, VUW Press, Wellington p.63

⁸ WCC Archives ref 00058:537:C25915 (note the permit is dated 06 December 1967)

⁹ Tyler, L. 2008 “Massey House (now New Zealand Payroll House)” in Gatley, J (ed). *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand’s New Architecture 1904-1984*, Auckland University Press, Auckland. 79

¹⁰ Tony Nightingale. ‘Government and agriculture - Deregulation and environmental regulations, 1984 onwards’, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 3-Jun-10

URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/government-and-agriculture/9>

¹¹ Hugh Stringleman and Frank Scrimgeour. ‘Dairying and dairy products - Dairy exports’, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 3-Jul-12 URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/dairying-and-dairy-products/11>

¹² “Dairy Industry Strategy: Industry Good”, Dairy NZ Website accessed October 2012

http://www.dairynz.co.nz/page/pageid/2145855896/Industry_Good

¹³ “The New Zealand Meat Board”, New Zealand Meat Board website accessed October 2012
<http://www.nzmeatboard.org/main.cfm?id=9>

1.2 Timeline

1950	The Dairy Board offered the Meat Board a half-share in a site on Lambton Quay.
1951	Preliminary plans prepared by Ernst Plischke and Cedric Firth, engineers were Edwards and Clendon (now Clendon, Burns and Park)
1952	Meat and Dairy Boards negotiated to purchase the property to the north of the site, but were not successful.
July 1953	Photomontage of the site appeared in the Evening Post.
July 1954	Tenders called for the construction of the building.
January 1955	Timber shops were demolished and construction of Massey House began.
4 October 1957	The Building was opened.
1958	Plischke designed the fit-out of the bookshop and café.
1966	The Meat and Dairy Boards arranged to purchase the site to the south that had been occupied by the Royal Hotel.
1967-68	Construction of the south extension to Massey House

1.3 Architect

PLISCHKE AND FIRTH¹⁴

Ernst Plischke (1903-1992) was one of the most brilliant of the European refugees to come to New Zealand at the time of the Second World War. He had already distinguished himself in his home of Austria as a proponent of the Modern Movement. He gained employment in Wellington in the Department of Housing Construction, and was influential in guiding the Department towards the modern utopian vision of well planned suburbs, with modern affordable houses set to take advantage of space, sun and open plan living. He was the designer of the new suburb of Naenae, and was author of an influential book at this time, propounding the advantages of modern design.

His partnership with Firth realised the modern movement landmark of Massey House, Wellington, as well as the Taihape Catholic Church and the Cashmere Community Centre. A number of his houses, particularly that for the Sutch family in Brooklyn, are amongst the most uncompromisingly modern in New Zealand. Plischke returned to Vienna in 1963, being made an Honorary Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1968.

Cedric Firth (1908- 1994) attended Auckland Grammar School and was apprenticed to a builder. He graduated as an architect, travelled in Europe and, on returning to New Zealand, he joined the Department of Housing Construction in Wellington. In 1948 he took a position as Head of Housing for the Town & Country Planning Division of the United Nations in New York, working on large scale housing schemes in Brazil and Africa. He returned to New Zealand in 1952 and entered the partnership with Plischke that produced, in particular, Massey House. He designed a number of houses during this time, and continued on his own from 1959 after the dissolution of the partnership. Firth's legacy is a number of interesting modern houses, including his own built in 1941, and his book *State Housing in New Zealand*, 1949, which set out the housing philosophy of the Government and the Department of Housing Construction.

¹⁴ WCC Heritage Inventory 2001 ref Appendix III. Also *Zeal & Crusade*, ed. John Wilson, Te Waihora Press; essays by Greg Bowron, Julia Gatley & Linda Tyler

He had a strong social concern for accessible, standardised and good quality public housing, to be realised through urban planning on modern lines, and he influenced Government policies on these matters.

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

Massey House was the most important building designed in New Zealand by noted Austrian-born architect, Ernst Plischke. The building represents something of a coming of age for New Zealand architecture, bringing to these shores “a clear statement of Modern architecture and the functional aesthetic of Internationalism.”¹⁵

The eight-storey structure was reputedly influenced by the work of Le Corbusier; certainly, significant aspects of the building address Le Corbusier’s five points of architecture. Columns (called *pilotis*) elevate the mass of the building from the ground, introducing a lightness and airiness into the ground-floor frontage. Internally, this allows the planning to be more or less free of the structure. The facade is similarly independent, and the windows form a well proportioned pattern of grids and horizontal bands, carefully contrived. The eighth-floor balcony caps the building with a free-form concrete roof that suggests Le Corbusier’s trademark roof garden.¹⁶

The building was designed for maximum transparency to reveal the structural frame, particularly at ground-floor and eighth-floor level where the glass walls recede behind the round columns of the building’s structure. The interior has many features of interest, particularly the showpiece rooms of the Meat Producers’ seventh-floor headquarters. Recessed lighting, built-in furniture crafted in local timbers, and many other features were well-documented in contemporary newspaper accounts of the building.

2.2 Materials

Concrete foundations, walls, floors and walls
Curtain wall glazing

2.3 Setting

The building has two street elevations, the primary elevation is to Lambton Quay, and the secondary is to The Terrace.

Massey House, when it was first constructed, towered over the masonry Victorian and Edwardian buildings of Lambton Quay. Lambton Quay changed over the past sixty years, particularly during the “boom” years of the 1980s and Massey House is now just one of the many high-rise, curtain walled office buildings that predominate the streetscape of Wellington’s CBD.

To the north of Massey House is the 1960s former Manchester Unity Building (now Quest on Lambton) with its distinctive diamond pattern windows. To the south of Massey House is the 1967 extension by Cedric Firth, constructed at a slight angle to the original building to reflect the curve of the road. Further south is the later Allied Nationwide Finance tower and podium.

¹⁵ Kernohan D. 1989, Wellington’s New Buildings, VUW Press, Wellington p.63

¹⁶ Kernohan D. 1989, Wellington’s New Buildings, VUW Press, Wellington p.63

Massey House is sited near the Stout Street Heritage Area that includes the following heritage buildings

- Supreme Court, 36-42 Stout Street and annexe, Whitmore Street
- Missions to Seamen Building, 7 Stout Street
- State Insurance, 143 Lambton Quay (plus Hotere sculpture in Stout Street footpath)
- Public Trust Building, 131 Lambton Quay
- Departmental Building, 15-21 Stout Street
- Façade, Courts Building, cnr, Stout and Whitmore Sts
- Wellesley Club, 2-8 Maginnity St

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?*

Massey House is one of the most influential examples Modern Movement architecture in New Zealand. The building has aesthetic value for the sculptural treatment of its structural elements. Of particular note is the cantilevered verandah with its “polka dot” lighting scheme; the ground floor piloti; the entrance foyer; the glazing to the ground floor retail units; the bookshop interior; and the roof terrace with its sculptural service towers.

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 was once a landmark on Lambton Quay, and stood in strong contrast to the small scale, masonry, Edwardian and Victorian buildings that were the standard building type for Lambton Quay. Massey House was the precursor to the modern high-rise, curtain wall buildings that now surround it, and the building continues to make a strong positive contribution to a streetscape.

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 1955-57 original building, along with the 1967 Firth extension and the c.1967 Manchester Unity building to the north make up a good representative collection of Modernist office buildings designed in the same time period, to the same scale, and utilising the same type of building materials.

Historic Value:

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

The building has historic value for its association with the Meat and Dairy Producer Boards. The building is a significant work by Ernst Plischke, an influential Austrian-born architect and his partner Cedric Firth. There is also some historic significance for its association with Roy Parson’s bookshop that was in business until 2014.

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

The building has a strong historic association with the primary industries that were central to New Zealand’s development as a trading nation. The marketing boards were once central to the management of these primary industries.

Scientific Value:

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

The building is located in Wellington's CBD and the site is likely to have had a long history of occupation.

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 is held in high esteem by the architectural community where it is considered to be a seminal building of the Modern Movement in New Zealand. This can be seen in the many architectural publications that include monologues on the building.

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?

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?*

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?*

Local/Regional/National/International

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

3.0 References

Cochran, C. and Russell Murray, 2010. "Massey House, Lambton Quay Wellington: Conservation Plan"

Kernohan D. 1989, Wellington.s New Buildings, VUW Press, Wellington p.63

Tyler, L. 2008 "Massey House (now New Zealand Payroll House)" in Gatley, J (ed). *Long Live the Modern: New Zealand's New Architecture 1904-1984*, Auckland University Press, Auckland.

Tyler L. 1997 "Modernity Arrives" in Wilson J. ed., *Zeal and Crusade - The Modern Movement in Wellington*, Te Waihora Press, Wellington p.103

WCC Heritage Inventory 2001 ref Lamb2

WCC Heritage Inventory 2001 ref Appendix III.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory	Y	
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
WCC Records – building file		
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
Plan change?	Y	
Heritage Area Report	Y	none
Heritage Area Spreadsheet	Y	none
Heritage items folder (electronic)	y	
HPT website	y	
HPT files	n	
Conservation Plan	y	
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)	y	

Background research