

# Whanganui District Heritage Inventory

## Heritage Assessment and Statement of Significance

**Item: Terrace House**

**Register Item No:** 323      **Class:** Class B

**Address:** Watt Street, Whanganui

**Legal Description:**

Lots 1 & 2, DP 11880; Sec 1, SO 35840, Lot 7, DP 2475

**Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga List Number and Category (if applicable):** N/A

**Heritage Values:**

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Cultural/Social
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Setting/Context
- Interior



*Figure 1: Terrace House, the former Government Departmental Building.*

### Statement of Significance

Terrace House opened in 1981, serving assorted Government departments at the time of opening. Designed by the Ministry of Works and Development, its design was considered cutting-edge and won a national award. It is today in private ownership and remains in demand with larger institutional tenants.

It is one of the most prominent and unique Brutalist buildings in Whanganui, and the design, overseen by Graydon Miskimmin, remains of interest to architectural historians, local residents, and visitors alike, for its high-tech visual qualities and landmark value adjacent to Pukenui Queen's Park.

## Physical Description

Terrace House is a six-storey reinforced concrete building, with additional basement below for carparks. The building takes the form of an arrangement of cubes, and cross-shaped beams are on the exterior of each cube.

It is sited on an L-shaped footprint, with a plaza opening onto the intersection of Watt Street and Wicksteed Street. Each level of the building is smaller in size than the one below it, allowing ample space for open balconies. A light well in the middle of the building allows light into the ground floor where floor space is greatest but ambient light levels are low.

Glazed walkways through the plaza and on some parts of the footpath give shelter to pedestrians using the building from the elements.

## Historical Significance

None Low **Moderate** High Outstanding

*Whether the place is associated with important or representative themes or aspects of local, regional, or national history; whether the place is associated with historically important events, persons, groups, ideas, movements, social patterns, activities, or developments or advancements; and/or whether the place retains a use, function or integrity of association that contributes to the historical importance of the place.*

Designed in 1979, and opened in 1981, the building is closely associated with the politics and Government of the day – though not as much as Wairere House (the Computer Centre building on Somme Parade and Bates Street).

The building was opened by then-Prime Minister, Robert Muldoon. Muldoon's Third National Government embarked on a number of large interventionist projects, and sought to maintain and strengthen the country's welfare state model.<sup>1</sup>

Terrace House, also known as the Departmental Building, is representative of this aspect of the country's history around the time it was built.

Although a number of organisations and groups have used the building over the years, the Department of Social Welfare was an important tenant, as was its successor organisation Work and Income. Later, Whanganui's School of Design moved into the facility which has enhanced its significance as a site associated with cutting-edge design practice in the region.

## Social Significance

None Low **Moderate** High Outstanding

*Whether the place has a strong or special association with, or is held in high regard by, a particular community or cultural group for its symbolic, spiritual, commemorative, traditional or other cultural value; whether the place makes a significant contribution to the uniqueness or identity of the locality,*

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<sup>1</sup> (Gustafson 2010)

*district, region or nation; whether the place is an icon or marker that a community or culture (past or present) identifies with; and/or whether the place is significant to tangata whenua.*

Among values other former uses have imparted on the building, it has come to have associations with Whanganui's strengths in design education and practice, though it no longer is used as a School of Design.

It was highlighted nationally in 2024 in Architecture New Zealand magazine, identified by architectural critic Andrew Barrie as one of the fourteen most important buildings in Whanganui, for its contribution to experimental architecture.<sup>2</sup>

## Architecture, Technological and Construction Significance

None Low Moderate High **Outstanding**

*Whether the place has architectural value; whether the place belongs to important architectural styles or is a good example of vernacular architecture; whether the place has distinctive attributes of an aesthetic or functional nature (including massing, proportion, materials, detail, fenestration, ornamentation, artwork, functional layout, landmark status or symbolic value); whether the place demonstrates innovation or accomplishment, through design, use of materials or technology,, method of construction or of craft skill; and whether the place is associated with an architect, engineer, designer or builder who has made a special contribution to their profession or work.*

It was said that Whanganui would lead the world in earthquake-resistant design, when the Departmental Building was completed in 1981. Indeed, the building is highly innovative and distinctive, in both aesthetic and functional ways, and has become a landmark symbolising innovation through design in Whanganui. One article published in December 1979 identified the following key features:

The earthquake resistant structure developed by Dr Clive Matthewson<sup>3</sup> and Bob Davey consists of pre-cast concrete panels of cross-braced form arranged around the perimeter of the building. The energy of an earthquake is absorbed by steel 'inserts', which are incorporated within the panel braces. 'All steel absorbs energy if stretched or compressed beyond yield point. What we have done is to use this property of steel to fulfil an earthquake resistant function,' Matthewson says. These energy absorbing devices are what make the building unique.<sup>4</sup>

The cross-braced concrete panels are five metres long by three metres high with connections of welded steel encased in reinforced concrete. A large earthquake would produce very high forces in the connections and corner columns. 'These forces are controlled by the steel insert assemblies in the bottom ends of the diagonal braces in the lowest three storeys,' says Matthewson. 'When the building is stressed by the force of an

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<sup>2</sup> (Barrie 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Clive Denby Matthewson MNZM is a New Zealand civil engineer and former politician.

<sup>4</sup> DESIGNSCAPE 120, Dec 1979-Jan 1980, p18

earthquake the steel inserts are extended and shortened by the movement of the building. They yield in both directions and absorb the energy of the earthquake.<sup>5</sup>

The behaviour of the building was tested using a computer programme developed at the University of California. A mathematical representation of the building was fed into a computer and subjected to different types and strengths of tremors. Whanganui is in a high risk earthquake area and all buildings must be constructed to survive moderate tremors with no damage and severe tremors without collapse. 'Testing showed the building will stand up to a severe earthquake.' Davey says. 'An earthquake the size of the Napier one would leave the building unharmed.'<sup>6</sup>

One of the important costs in earthquake damage comes not from structural harm to the building but from damage to the internal fittings— windows, light fittings, ceilings, and internal partitions. A building may survive a major earthquake with no structural damage but the movement between the floors may smash all the windows and generally cause havoc. Protection can be gained by introducing shear walls to minimise movement. Exterior walls raise the problem of letting light in. Similarly, interior shear walls may restrict the planning of the offices inside.<sup>7</sup>

Using the pre-cast concrete panels as the earthquake resistant elements eliminates the need for shear walls as the resultant structure is very stiff and strong. Movement between the floors is very small and internal damage is minimised. Wanganui is a low rise city, the central area consisting largely of two-and three storey buildings which, although differing in detail, run together to give continuity and a human scale urban environment. A massive high rise block would not have fitted in with the city's character, so the new buildings will consist of six metre square modules in an irregular plan form with irregular setbacks at each storey. The stepped-back design provides more accommodation at the ground level and first floor levels to house the divisions most used by the public. It also reduces the height of the building close to the roads, people and other buildings.<sup>8</sup>

The upper floors decrease in area with height and will cater for the activities requiring less contact with the public and greater privacy, for example social welfare counselling. Roof terraces formed by the stepping back of the upper floors will create areas where people can relax in their lunch break.<sup>9</sup>

The building retains close associations with Project Architect AD (Tony) Baker (Ministry of Works, Architectural Department (1979-1981)) and Government Architect Graydon Miskimmin.

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<sup>5</sup> DESIGNSCAPE 120, Dec 1979-Jan 1980, p18

<sup>6</sup> DESIGNSCAPE 120, Dec 1979-Jan 1980, p18

<sup>7</sup> DESIGNSCAPE 120, Dec 1979-Jan 1980, p18

<sup>8</sup> DESIGNSCAPE 120, Dec 1979-Jan 1980, p18

<sup>9</sup> DESIGNSCAPE 120, Dec 1979-Jan 1980, p18

## Setting and Contextual Significance

None Low **Moderate** High Outstanding

*Whether the place contributes to or is associated with a wider historical or cultural context whether the place contributes to the streetscape, townscape or landscape; whether the place has collective value as a part or member of a group of inter-related, but not necessarily contiguous, heritage features or places or a wider heritage landscape; and whether the place is part of a group of heritage features or places (contiguous or discontinuous), that, taken together, have a coherence because of such factors as age, history, appearance, style, scale, fabric or use.*

The building contributes to its immediate surrounds, nestled in a corner of Watt Street and oriented towards Whanganui Regional Museum, and Pukenamu Queens Park behind it. It shares a continuity of age and material with the 1969 extensions to the museum, and a contextual relationship with the building accordingly.

Despite being seven storeys high (at the rear of the building), it does not dominate the landscape when viewed from further away. Its terraced style reflects both the variety of buildings around it, but also the hilly landscape it is nestled amongst.

## Archaeological and Scientific Significance

None **Low** Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place has the potential to contribute new or important information about the history of the place or wider area through archaeological or scientific investigation; whether the place retains a physical form that can be appreciated by the community to aid in the understanding of past uses or history; whether the place has the potential to provide evidence to address archaeological or scientific research questions.*

The building is not of archaeological significance.

It may have the potential to address scientific research questions in relation to seismic resistance and building strengthening techniques.

## Representativeness, rarity and integrity

None Low Moderate **High** Outstanding

*Whether the place is a representative example of a particular class or type of place; whether the place or a component of it is rare, unique, the first such place or is the only such place in the locality, district, region or nation; whether the place retains a significant amount of original or early fabric, or fabric from an important period in the place's history.*

The building is not the only example of a Brutalist design in Whanganui, though it retains a significant amount of its fabric and it is a very high quality and unique example of the style. Accordingly, its overall representativeness, rarity and integrity is assessed as being high.

**Date: 20 September 2024**

**Research by: Scott Flutey**

## References

December 1979-January 1980. *Designscape* 120 18.

Barrie, Andrew. 2024. "Itinerary City Guide: Whanganui." *Architecture New Zealand*, 1 August.  
<https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/itinerary-city-guide-whanganui/>.

Gustafson, Barry. 2010. "'Muldoon, Robert David'." *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.  
<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6m1/muldoon-robert-david>.

**Additional Photographs and/or images:**



*Figure 2: Plaque installed at the entrance of the building, highlighting the accolades received at the 1979 Monier Design Awards.*



*Figure 3: Plaque installed at the entrance to the building when it was opened in 1981.*