

DISTRICT PLAN – LISTED HERITAGE PLACE
HERITAGE ASSESSMENT – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
HERITAGE ITEM NUMBER 516
***FORMER HIGH STREET POST OFFICE AND SETTING –
209 TUAM STREET, CHRISTCHURCH***



PHOTOGRAPH: M.VAIR-PIOVA, 10/12/2014

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Historical and social values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular person, group, organisation, institution, event, phase or activity; the continuity and/or change of a phase or activity; social, historical, traditional, economic, political or other patterns.

The former High Street Post Office has high historical and social significance for its association with the Depression-era building programme of the first Labour government and its former use as a post office. The building was officially opened on 17 June 1932 by the Postmaster-General with the public in attendance. It replaced an earlier building and provided much needed services for business clientele in the neighbouring commercial and warehouse area of central Christchurch. Prior to the construction of the building, temporary services were afforded at premises in Lichfield Street. The building originally also housed the District Telegraph Engineer and his staff. A posting lobby, dock for mail vans and the entrance to the lift and staircase were accessed from Tuam Street. Entry to the post office

was from High Street. The building housed the Postmaster's office, mailroom, strong room, Engineer's clerical staff, Radio Inspector's office, District and County Telegraph Engineer's offices, technical staff, engineering cadets, the drawing office, printing room and lunchroom. Only the ground floor was used for postal services, with the upper floors occupied by clerical and draughting staff of the District Telegraph Engineer. At the time it opened only one of New Zealand's suburban post offices was said to be larger.

Following the closure and downsizing of postal services, the building has since 1992 been associated with the long-running video rental business Alice in Videoland (est. 1985). In the late 1990s other occupants included an Electoral Office, and Maori Women's Welfare League. The building passed into private ownership in 1998. In 2010 the building's tenants included a private box mail sorting area, Alice in Videoland, the Physics Room Art Gallery, and a hairdressing salon. It suffered little damage and was repaired following the 2010 and 2011 Canterbury earthquakes with some internal alterations carried out at the same time to house the C1 Café in the principal section facing High Street.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Cultural and spiritual values that demonstrate or are associated with the distinctive characteristics of a way of life, philosophy, tradition, religion, or other belief, including: the symbolic or commemorative value of the place; significance to Tangata Whenua; and/or associations with an identifiable group and esteemed by this group for its cultural values.

The former High Street Post Office has cultural significance associated with its former use as a post office and its change of use to commercial operations reflecting the societal changes in the postal system and service offered by the Post Office. It has cultural significance for the community through its current use as a gallery space, small theatre and café.

ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

Architectural and aesthetic values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular style, period or designer, design values, form, scale, colour, texture and material of the place.

The former High Street Post Office has high architectural significance for its Stripped Classical style designed by John Mair, the Government Architect, in 1930. Mair (1876-1959) was born in Invercargill and educated at the University of Pennsylvania. After a period in private practise on his return to New Zealand, Mair was appointed Inspector of Military Hospitals by the Defence Department in 1918, and in 1920 he became architect to the Department of Education. Following the retirement of John Campbell in 1922, Mair was appointed Government Architect, a position which he held until his retirement in 1942. Mair was a highly regarded member of the profession and his oeuvre reflects changing tastes in government architectural imagery. Heritage New Zealand lists six post offices around New Zealand erected during Mair's tenure as Government Architect, including those in Hastings (c.1932), Dunedin (1937), Devonport (1938), and Lower Hutt (1940-43).

The former High Street Post Office is four stories high, with two principal decorative elevations facing east and south. The other elevations are more utilitarian in character. The building follows the American skyscraper classical column analogy, with a ground floor 'base', central 'shaft' with fluted pilasters and Doric capitals, and a defined 'capital', with a cornice and open balustraded parapet. Window openings are large, and joinery is of steel. Bronze panels with garland motifs are located at second and third floor level. Two torchere lights in metal and glass are located at either side of the High Street entrance. The entrance steps, transom over the entrance portal and the walls of the entrance porch are lined with a

dado of grey and black marble. William Williamson, who also built hydroelectric power station sand freezing works, was the contractor. With the exception of the doors, structural steel and glass, the materials used in construction were all sourced in New Zealand, as per government policy of the day. Rimu, kauri and totara were specified for the interior work, the granite was sourced from the Coromandel and the marble from Takaka. Messrs W Toomey and Co. was responsible for the brass counter grilles, the bronze coat of arms was originally located over the main entrance but now removed, the lap brackets, and other metalwork. The building has been altered with internal fitouts for different tenants over time. In the late 1960s tenders were called for a single-storey addition to the west of the original building, as well as alterations to the original building. Some alterations to accommodate new uses have also been made in particular post the 2010-2011 earthquakes.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP SIGNIFICANCE

Technological and craftsmanship values that demonstrate or are associated with: the nature and use of materials, finishes and/or technological or constructional methods which were innovative, or of notable quality for the period.

The former High Street Post Office has high technological and craftsmanship significance for what it may reveal of interwar construction methods, materials, fixtures and fittings. It has technological significance for the use of reinforced concrete construction with marble and granite facings and steel windows. It was announced in 1930 that the new post office was to be built of brick however the impact of the 1931 Hawke's Bay and the new national building standards for earthquake safety that followed meant a change to reinforced concrete construction. The speed with which the building was redesigned for reinforced concrete construction is indicative of the leading role the government played in responding to the implications of the Hawke's Bay earthquake. The former High Street Post Office has craftsmanship significance for its external classical detailing which evidences skills and techniques of the time.

CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Contextual values that demonstrate or are associated with: a relationship to the environment (constructed and natural), a landscape, setting, group, precinct or streetscape; a degree of consistency in terms of type, scale, form, materials, texture, colour, style and/or detail; recognised landmarks and landscape which are recognised and contribute to the unique identity of the environment.

The former High Street Post Office and its setting has high contextual significance for its setting, landmark status and contribution to a group. Prior to the 2010 and 2011 Canterbury earthquakes the building stood in an area of Victorian and Edwardian commercial building, remnants of which survive. The location of the building on a prominent corner site, fronting on to one of the city's triangle reserves, enhances the building's landmark status, as does its architectural style and its high profile and long-standing tenant, Alice in Videoland. A road was originally located directly in front of the building, between it and the triangle reserve. This road has since been closed to traffic and is a paved pedestrian area. The building also relates to the Chief Post Office in Cathedral Square, as two extant examples of the evolution of government architecture in the city. The setting of the building consists of the area of land covered by the building, and the small unbuilt service area to the north of the building.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE

Archaeological or scientific values that demonstrate or are associated with: the potential to provide information through physical or scientific evidence an understanding about social

historical, cultural, spiritual, technological or other values of past events, activities, structures or people.

The former High Street Post Office and its setting has archaeological significance because it has potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to construction methods and materials, and other human activity, including that which pre-dates 1900. The 1862 and 1877 maps of the central city show that buildings were on and/or near the site of the former Post Office in the 19th century.

ASSESSMENT STATEMENT

The former High Street Post Office and its setting has high overall significance to Christchurch, including Banks Peninsula for its association with the nation-wide building programme of the first Labour government and its former use as a post office. The building has historical significance for its use of a variety of services. It originally housed the District Telegraph Engineer and his staff, a posting lobby, dock for mail vans, the Postmaster's office, mailroom, strong room, Engineer's clerical staff, Radio Inspector's office, District and County Telegraph Engineer's offices, technical staff, engineering cadets, the drawing office, printing room and lunchroom. Only the ground floor was used for public postal services. The former High Street Post Office has cultural significance associated with its former use as a post office. It also has cultural significance for the community through its current use as a gallery space, small theatre and café. The building has high architectural significance for its design by Government Architect J T Mair in the Stripped Classical style. The former High Street Post Office has high technological significance for what it may reveal of interwar construction methods, materials, fixtures and fittings and its earthquake-resistant construction in reinforced concrete, and craftsmanship significance for the use of New Zealand materials and the quality of their use in the design. The building has high contextual significance as an inner-city landmark both before and since the Canterbury earthquakes. The former High Street Post Office and its setting has archaeological significance because it has potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to construction methods and materials, and other human activity, including that which pre-dates 1900.

REFERENCES:

'High Street Post Office' Archives New Zealand

<http://archives.govt.nz>

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<https://www.facebook.com/Highstreetprecinctproject>

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