

Palmerston North Police Station (Former)

351-361 Church Street, Palmerston North

NZHPT Registration Number:	9534
NZHPT Registration Type:	Historic Place – Category II
NZHPT Registration Date:	20/08/2010
City/District Council:	Palmerston North City Council
District Plan Status:	Not listed



Brief History

The former Palmerston North Police Station, completed in 1939, was occupied by the Palmerston North police for over sixty-five years. It was the city's fourth police station, and replaced a wooden Victorian era building on the same site. The section of land bordered by Church Street and Main Street, also the site of the current Courthouse, has been associated with law enforcement since the late nineteenth century. In 2005 the new Palmerston North Central Police Station was opened on the opposite side of Church Street because of a growing workforce and the need to accommodate new technologies used in policing.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Government spending on public buildings declined. The new purpose-built Police Station cost around £30,000, a large sum at the time and signified the Government's commitment to providing facilities for a modernising police force and to investing in public works more generally. The foundation stone was laid in September 1938 by the Hon. Peter Fraser, Minister of Police and later Prime Minister, at a ceremony also attended by the Commissioner of Police, D G Cummings, several Members of Parliament, other dignitaries, and many members of the public. A time capsule was placed in the building at the time. No official opening ceremony was held due to the onset of the Second World War.

The reinforced concrete building was designed by the Office of the Government Architect under the leadership of John Thomas Mair. It consists of a symmetrical two story main block with originally a single story wing on the eastern side of the front elevation. The design incorporated an existing cell block built in 1935 at the rear of the previous wooden police station.

The building is in Mair's favoured Stripped Classical style, which is characterised by the restrained use of Classical elements such as columns and pediments. The front elevation is thickly plastered over the concrete structure with imitation stone joints. Decoration is limited to the front elevation of the main block with recessed windows set in an Art Deco ziggurat surround, a hand-modelled Royal Coat of Arms and a kowhaiwhai parapet. The use of a Maori design elements was extremely rare for public buildings at the time but is also a notable feature of the Sir Geoffrey Peren Building, Massey University.

After his appointment as Government Architect in 1923, Mair made a determined move away from the traditional styles formerly used for public buildings towards modernist architecture. Modernism embraced the use of materials such as reinforced concrete and prefabricated metal joinery. The theory and design of reinforced concrete was developed in Europe from about 1890-1915. It was used increasingly in New Zealand from the early twentieth century and its use was given further impetus after earthquakes in Napier (1931) and Long Beach, California (1933) because of its potential for earthquake resistance. Seismic resistance was mandatory and unreinforced masonry was banned under the new 1935 New Zealand design code. Structural engineers in California, Japan and New Zealand led the development in the use of reinforced concrete.

At the time of its construction, the former Police Station was considered a model police station, the most modern of its type in the Southern Hemisphere. The design was intended to promote efficiency in police service operations, and incorporated sleeping, dining and recreation facilities for staff. It attracted interest from a number of Australian State Police Commissioners who requested plans to assist in designing police stations across the Tasman. The building has largely retained its original form despite several modifications. A second story was added to the east wing of the building some time prior to 1983 and the ornamental gates were removed. In the 1990s, a porch and ramp were added to improve access to the building. A number of internal walls remain due to the reinforced construction and although some of the interior linings and joinery have been replaced over the years, sections of the original material can still be seen.

After the departure of the police, the time capsule was opened. It held copies of newspapers containing articles on the foundation stone laying ceremony, and papers from the Public Works Department including architectural drawings of the building. A photograph showed workers laying the concrete foundation and the structural steel going up. Also included was a hand-painted scroll signed by key people involved and dignitaries present at the foundation stone laying ceremony.

Principal Sources:

- Reed, P, Schoonees, K, & Salmond, J, *Historic Concrete Structures in New Zealand: Overview, Maintenance and Management*, Wellington, Department of Conservation, 2008.
- Palmerston North Police Station (Former)*, NZHPT Register no. 9534, 20/7/2010, Natasha Naus, New Zealand Historic Places Trust.
- Palmerston North City Library Photograph Collection: Pol 1, 2a-e, 5, 11, 13; Former wooden police station Pol 4.