



WORDS: ANNA DUNLOP / IMAGERY: TOM ACKROYD

## Open wide

A central Wellington apartment building once played a key role in the myth of the ‘murder house’ that haunted many Kiwi childhoods

No one enjoys a visit to the dentist, but spare a thought for schoolchildren of the early- to mid-1900s who endured so much pain in the country’s dental clinics – with their sharp metal implements and foot-powered drills – that the buildings were nicknamed, rather morbidly, ‘murder houses’. It’s a name that

quickly wove itself into New Zealand’s cultural fabric.

This widespread dental anxiety came about after a free dental health programme for primary school students, the New Zealand School Dental Service, was instigated – the first of its kind in the world. It was launched in 1920 following surveys by the New Zealand Dental Association

that showed an appalling prevalence of dental disease among the country’s children. All-female dental nurses were trained (they were cheaper than their male counterparts and assumed to be better suited than men to looking after children) and by 1931 there were 174 dental clinics throughout the country.

Following the election of New Zealand’s first Labour Government in 1935, the dental service was expanded – dental training schools were established and more dental nurses were trained. (Years later, in 1974, these nurses would march down Lambton Quay in Wellington in protest over the poor pay, poor resources and ‘military-style’ working conditions to which they had been subjected for more than half a century;

as noted in Noel O’Hare’s book *Tooth and Veil*, it was “almost certainly the largest organised demonstration of women since the days of the suffragettes”.)

One such training facility, the Wellington Children’s Dental Clinic (a Category 2 historic place), opened at the upper end of Willis Street in 1940, following several years of construction on the site of the old Te Aro School (which was demolished in 1933).

The building was designed by government architect JT Mair, and its stripped Classical style, devoid of traditional decorative detailing, is typical of government buildings of the inter-war years.

Kerryn Pollock, Area Manager Central for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga and co-author of *Heritage*



## ✦ LOCATION

Wellington city is situated at the south-western tip of the North Island.

*of Health: A Brief History of Medical Practices, Maternity Homes and Motorways in Te Aro, Wellington*, says that a considerable part of the clinic's heritage significance is due to its social history and former function.

"It symbolises the state intervention and statewide health initiatives that ramped up under the first Labour Government."

Another important feature of the building is its scale. "It gives a sense of monumentalism, which again speaks to the importance of the school dental service," says Kerryn.

Additionally, as she notes in her book, it created "a huge, monolithic presence on a street that was generally populated by smaller buildings". In the early 1900s, the area around the dental clinic consisted predominantly of two-storey villas, many of which had been bought by medical practitioners to establish general practices and maternity homes.

"It became informally known as the 'Harley Street of Wellington'," says Kerryn – a nod to the famous medical precinct in London.

A conservation plan, prepared by Julia Kennedy for Victoria University of Wellington's School of Architecture in 1998, details the building's construction, as well as its aesthetic



**Above:** An interior view of the Children's Dental Clinic, Wellington. Unknown photographer. 1940. *The Dominion Post* Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library. Ref: EP-Health-Hospitals-Dental-01. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

and scientific significance. Foundations, floors, walls, columns and roofs were built of reinforced concrete, with air vents made from cast bronze, and copper used for flashings and downpipes. High-quality timbers were also used: tōtara for floor battens, rimu for ceiling joists, and kauri and rimu for the joinery.

The interior was carefully designed to meet the requirements of a purpose-built dental clinic and training school. According to the conservation plan, the ground floor was for administrative use, with a large waiting room and assembly hall for staff and students; the first floor was devoted to teaching, and comprised a lecture room and lounge and dining spaces; and the second floor housed the children's dental clinic.

It was this upper level that stood out: six-metre-high windows allowed maximum

levels of light into the vast clinic, which in 1940 held 49 dental units identifiable by numbered lights. A mezzanine floor housed an X-ray machine and research department, and other rooms on the second floor included an extraction room, a recovery room and an orthodontic department.

It's interesting to note that the listing information available for the dental clinic on the New Zealand Heritage List Rārangī Kōrero is scant. This is, in part, due to changes to the Historic Places Act (which was first passed in 1954), as well as the evolution of the list, says Anna Renton-Green, Manager Heritage Listing at Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.

"The initial focus was predominantly on archaeological sites, and it wasn't until the 1980s that registers for buildings, historic

areas and traditional sites were established," she says.

Different processes and criteria were used to create each of these registers – hence the disparity in the types and levels of information available for different entries.


"There was a bias towards buildings, which were often seen as 'frozen moments', divorced from the landscape context," says Anna.

These separate registers were combined to form the Register of Historic Places, Historic Areas, Wāhi Tapu and Wāhi Tapu Areas (renamed 'the List' in 2014, with the addition of a new category – Wāhi Tūpuna).

Listing Adviser Annie James adds that many of the older records are hard copies and haven't yet been digitalised.

"A substantial number of places were listed during the 1980s, and much of the information on them has yet to be reflected online. We're currently investigating how to add it to the list – it's a huge project."

The Wellington Children's Dental Clinic remained a functioning dental school until the early 1990s, when the training programme was scaled down and then closed. The building was then used for several years by Wellington Polytechnic to house its journalism, design and music departments, before being converted into apartments in 2004.

While this development altered the interior significantly (the massive, second-floor clinic space has sadly been lost), the exterior remains unchanged, standing as a reminder of one of New Zealand's first health policies – a social experiment that was admired and replicated in countries around the world. 

[heritage.org.nz/list-details/1350/Listing](https://heritage.org.nz/list-details/1350/Listing)