

## UNDERGROUND PUBLIC TOILETS



Underground toilet\_West  
Melbourne\_May  
2007\_general view



Underground toilet\_West  
Melbourne\_May 2007\_brick  
ventilator



Underground toilet\_West  
Melbourne\_May 2007\_railing  
detail



Underground toilet\_West Melbourne\_plan

### Location

KING AND HAWKE STREETS WEST MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

### Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

### Level of significance

Registered

### Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2133

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO935

## VHR Registration

February 14, 2008

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on - May 29, 2007

The underground men's public toilet in West Melbourne, built in 1938, is one of eleven built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century in response to public demand for public toilet facilities in Melbourne that were both sanitary and discreet. Street-level toilets were regarded as indecently open to public view. Underground toilets removed toilets from public view, and had already been built in Scotland, England and Sydney. The establishment in December 1890 of the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works, responsible for building and maintaining an underground sewerage system, had provided the necessary infrastructure. The first underground public toilet in Melbourne, which included facilities for women as well as men, was opened in Russell Street in 1902. Several more were built before World War I: a men's in Queen Street in 1905; a men's and women's in Elizabeth Street opposite the Queen Victoria Market in 1907; a men's in Swanston Street in 1909 (now demolished); a women's in Elizabeth Street outside the GPO in 1910 (a men's was added in c1927); and a women's outside the Town Hall in Collins Street in 1914 (a men's was added c1960). A men's was built in Flinders Street in 1918. Four more were built in the inter-war period: this one in West Melbourne, one in Carlton, and two in East Melbourne (one of which has been demolished).

The underground public toilet is in a small park at the corner of King and Hawke Streets, West Melbourne, near the south end of the Errol Street shopping strip. Above ground elements are very similar to the earlier underground toilets built in Melbourne between 1902 and 1918, and consist of two stairway entrances enclosed by iron railings, iron gates and cast iron combined ventilation pipes and sign posts. An additional feature at ground level, found only on this toilet and the one in Carlton built in 1939, is the *moderne* style polychrome brick ventilation shaft with decorative wrought iron panels. The toilet has now been decommissioned and the entrances are covered by concrete slabs. The condition of the interior is unknown.

Why is it significant?

The underground public toilet in West Melbourne is of historical and architectural significance to the state of Victoria.

How is it significant?

The underground public toilet in West Melbourne is of historical significance as one of the group of public toilets built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century which reflects an important era of sanitary, technological and social reform, as well as contemporary attitudes to public decency. It is a reflection of a major engineering achievement, the development of Melbourne's underground water, drainage and sewerage system, and the advances in sanitation and public health made possible, following the establishment of the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works in 1890.

The underground public toilet in West Melbourne is of architectural significance as an example of an unusual building type, and of early twentieth century civic design. The iron railings, gates and columns and the brick ventilation shaft are of interest as examples of street furniture of the period.

## Permit Exemptions

### General Exemptions:

General exemptions apply to all places and objects included in the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). General exemptions have been designed to allow everyday activities, maintenance and changes to your property, which don't harm its cultural heritage significance, to proceed without the need to obtain approvals under the Heritage Act 2017.

Places of worship: In some circumstances, you can alter a place of worship to accommodate religious practices without a permit, but you must **notify** the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria before you start the works or activities at least 20 business days before the works or activities are to commence.

Subdivision/consolidation: Permit exemptions exist for some subdivisions and consolidations. If the subdivision or consolidation is in accordance with a planning permit granted under Part 4 of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* and the application for the planning permit was referred to the Executive Director of Heritage Victoria as a determining referral authority, a permit is not required.

Specific exemptions may also apply to your registered place or object. If applicable, these are listed below. Specific exemptions are tailored to the conservation and management needs of an individual registered place or object and set out works and activities that are exempt from the requirements of a permit. Specific exemptions prevail if they conflict with general exemptions.

Find out more about heritage permit exemptions [here](#).

### Specific Exemptions:

The purpose of the permit exemptions is to allow works that do not impact on the heritage significance of the place to occur without the need for a permit. Works other than those mentioned in the permit exemptions may be possible but will require either the written approval of the Executive Director or permit approval.

#### General Conditions:

1. All alterations are to be planned and carried out in a manner which prevents damage to the fabric of the registered place.
2. Should it become apparent during further inspection or the carrying out of alterations that originally or previously hidden or inaccessible details of the place are revealed which relate to the significance of the place, then the exemption covering such alteration shall cease and the Executive Director shall be notified as soon as possible.
3. If there is a conservation policy and plan approved by the Executive Director, all works will be in accordance with it.
4. Nothing in this declaration prevents the Executive Director from amending or rescinding all or any of the permit exemptions.
5. Nothing in this declaration exempts owners or their agents from the responsibility to seek relevant planning or building permits from the responsible authority where applicable.

Minor repairs and maintenance are exempt from permits, as is the removal of extraneous non-original items.

Construction dates        1938,

Heritage Act Categories    Registered place,

Hermes Number 23553

Property Number

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## History

Until the latter part of the nineteenth century very limited public toilet facilities were available in Melbourne. Before 1859 public toilets were only available in hotels, and men often needed to relieve themselves in the city's laneways. Women faced even more severe problems, as it was not considered respectable for them to enter hotels. Public urination was a greater problem in the vicinity of restaurants or theatres, the Bourke Street East theatre precinct being particularly notorious. The local Board of Health had noted in 1856 that the lack of public toilets needed to be resolved and with the opening of the Yan Yean water supply in 1858, the necessary infrastructure was starting to be put in place.

The first urinals were placed directly over gutters, and the waste washed into the Yarra. Melbourne's first public toilet was built by the Melbourne City Council on the pavement in Bourke Street near Elizabeth Street in 1859 (*Argus*, 14 April 1859). No public facilities were available at that time for women. With developments in sanitation in other Australian cities and throughout Europe there was soon pressure to improve the rudimentary urinals. By 1888 Adelaide had a full sewage system in operation and Sydney's system was well on the way. In December 1890 the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works was established, with responsibility for establishing sewerage services to the City of Melbourne.

By 1879 however there were only a few public urinals left in the city, due to the numerous complaints about them received by the MCC, reflecting current concerns for public health as well as changing ideas of privacy. The solution was to move them underground. The *Australian Ironmonger* had discussed the underground conveniences in London, and said that they 'offer as efficient a solution of the problem as it is possible to conceive'. This publication highlighted the need for an underground sewerage system, concluding that 'till then the present showy structures must be endured'. The stink of urine in the back lanes continued to be one of the ubiquitous nineteenth century city smells.

The Town Clerk and City Surveyor had obtained details of underground toilets in Aberdeen, London, Leeds and Bournemouth. When in 1895 he received plans for the underground toilets in Aberdeen, the correspondent, the Hon Edward Langton, described Melbourne's above ground urinals as 'relics of a barbarous age'. There was an acceptance that underground toilets were needed in the city: Sydney had established underground conveniences by 1888, but Melbourne had to wait until the MMBW could provide the necessary plumbing.

The first underground public toilet was opened in Russell Street just south of Bourke Street on 23 June 1902. It was designed by Adrian C Mountain, the Melbourne City Surveyor. It included facilities for both men and women, and was both the first underground public toilet as well as the first public toilet for women in Melbourne. Until then Melbourne had no public toilets for women, who had to make do with a few semi-private toilets at the railway station, markets and department stores, and public facilities were only built following a sustained campaign.

A second underground public toilet for men was built in 1905 in Queen Street at the intersection with Collins Street. There was widespread opposition from the keepers of public morals to this structure, situated at the centre of Melbourne's business district. Representatives from the E S & A Bank, the Bank of Australasia, the National Trustees Company, the Stock Exchange and Safe Deposit Company, and the Institute of Architects sent a deputation to the Lord Mayor strongly objecting to the invasion of their civic territory. These objections demonstrate that even when located underground, public toilets continued to challenge notions of public respectability in the early twentieth century. The council defended the central location of the toilets, arguing that this was where such facilities were most needed.

It was not until 1907 that a second facility for women was opened, and the third for men, in Elizabeth Street opposite the Victoria Market. The fourth underground toilet for men was built at the corner of Swanston and Little Collins Streets in 1909; another in Elizabeth Street outside the GPO was completed in 1910 (a women's was only added here in c1927); one for women in Collins Street under the Town Hall in 1914 (a men's was added c1960); and the men's in Flinders Street in 1918.

Several were built in the inter-war period outside the central city area: in Carpentaria Place (now Gordon Reserve), East Melbourne (c1924); near the corner of King and Hawke Streets, West Melbourne (designed 1938, now covered); at the corner of Faraday and Lygon Streets, Carlton (designed 1939); and in Parliament Place, East Melbourne (1939, now demolished); After World War II facilities across Melbourne were invariably built at ground level. While they were originally built in response to contemporary standards of decency, which regarded underground toilets as more private and respectable than those in public view, modern users have different standards of public decency, and consider that toilets out of sight are unsafe.

## **Plaque Citation**

Built in 1938, this is one of eleven underground toilets built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century, and reflects an important era of sanitary and technological reform and contemporary attitudes to public decency.

## **Extent of Registration**

All the structures marked B1 and the land marked L1 on diagram 2133 held by the Executive Director. This includes the stone kerbing, the iron railings, gates and posts and the brick ventilation shaft.

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*This place/object may be included in the Victorian Heritage Register pursuant to the Heritage Act 2017. Check the Victorian Heritage Database, selecting 'Heritage Victoria' as the place source.*

*For further details about Heritage Overlay places, contact the relevant local council or go to Planning Schemes Online <http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/>*