

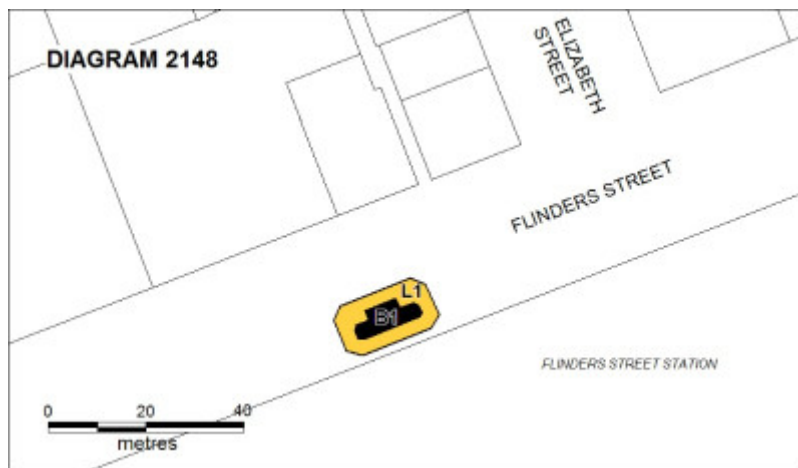
# UNDERGROUND PUBLIC TOILETS



Underground public toilet\_Flinders Street\_April 2007\_view from west



Underground public toilets\_Flinders Street\_April 2007\_view from east



H2148 Flinders St toilet plan

## Location

FLINDERS STREET MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2148

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO939

## VHR Registration

February 14, 2008

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

The men's underground public toilet in Flinders Street, built in 1918, is one of a number built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century in response to increasing public demand for public toilet facilities in the city that were both sanitary and discreet. The first public toilet, a urinal for men only, had been built in 1859, following the opening of the Yan Yean water supply in 1858. But street-level toilets were regarded as indecently open to public view, and without an underground sewerage system, the waste discharged directly into the gutters. Underground toilets, which removed toilets from public view, 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, 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). Four more were built in the inter-war period, in East Melbourne, West Melbourne and Carlton.

The men's underground public toilet is on the footpath on the south side of Flinders Street west of the junction with Elizabeth Street, outside Flinders Street station. Above ground elements consist of wrought iron railings on bluestone curbing, iron gates and cast iron posts. All the underground toilets from this period have similar wrought iron railings and gates, and cast iron sign posts that have been maintained and repainted over the years. When built it had stairways at each end, leading down to a space with a tiled floor and walls, five urinals, three WCs, a wash-basin and a store cupboard. In 1962 it was remodelled: at ground level new illuminated signs were added to the existing ventilation pipes, and the railings and ventilation pipes were painted; below ground the floor was laid with terrazzo, the stair handrails replaced, and new stainless steel urinals, an extra wash basin, and a cleaners' room were installed. The toilet has now been decommissioned and the entrances are covered by concrete slabs.

Why is it significant?

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

How is it significant?

The underground public toilet in Flinders Street is of historical significance as one of the oldest underground public toilets in Australia. It reflects an important era of sanitary, technological and social reform in the early twentieth century. It is significant as a reflection of attitudes to public decency in the early twentieth centuries. 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. This made possible the transformation of Melbourne from a smelly, disease-ridden city to a modern metropolis.

The underground public toilet in Flinders Street is of architectural significance as an early example of an unusual building type, and of early twentieth century civic design. Although the interior has been altered the remaining railings, gates and cast iron columns 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        1918,  
Heritage Act Categories   Registered place,  
Hermes Number            23089  
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

The men's underground public toilet in Flinders Street has local historical and architectural significance, but does not have sufficient cultural heritage significance to warrant inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register. It is one of a group of similar underground public toilets built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century, a group which is now unique in Australia. The first was built in Russell Street in 1902 (now decommissioned and sealed), followed by facilities in Queen Street (1905), Elizabeth Street near Victoria Street (1907), Swanston Street (1909, now demolished), Elizabeth Street outside the GPO (1910), in Collins Street under the Town Hall (1914), then the Flinders Street toilet (1918), Gordon Reserve (1924), West Melbourne (1938, now sealed), Carlton (1939) and East Melbourne (1939, now demolished). The Flinders Street toilet was the seventh of these underground public toilets built. It is no longer operating, and there are several other such facilities which have greater importance due to their age and/or the fact that they have retained their original function. The underground public toilet in Russell Street, though less intact at street level and now sealed, was both the first underground public toilet built in Victoria, and the first public toilet for women. It therefore has a high level of significance for its uniqueness and for its association with women's rights in the early twentieth century. The second toilet built, in Queen Street, is still functioning, and so is now the oldest continuously operating such facility in Victoria. The two facilities in Elizabeth Street are also earlier than the Flinders Street toilet, and are also still operating. These four pre-World War I toilets have all been recommended for inclusion in the Victorian Heritage Register. Although the Flinders Street toilet is important as one of a group of underground toilets which is now unique in Australia, it is not individually significant at a state level.

It is recommended that the toilet should not be included in the Victorian Heritage Register, but that it should be included in the City of Melbourne planning scheme.

Built in 1918, 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 2148 held by the Executive Director. This includes the stone kerbing, and the iron railings, gates and posts.

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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/>*