

# UNDERGROUND PUBLIC TOILETS



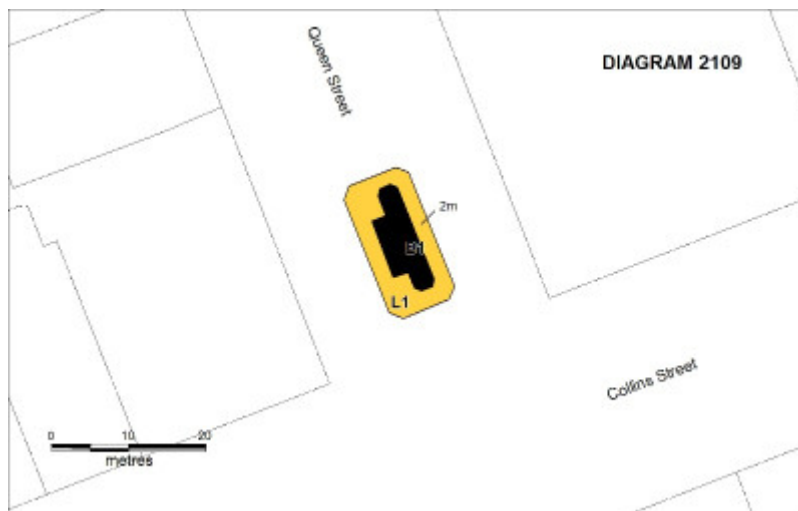
H2109 Underground Toilet  
Queen St 08 06 06 mz 015



H2109 Underground Toilet  
Queen St 08 06 06 mz 018



H2109 Underground Toilet  
Queen Street 08 06 06 mz  
016



H2109 queen st toilet

## Location

QUEEN STREET MELBOURNE, MELBOURNE CITY

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2109

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO943

## VHR Registration

September 13, 2007

## Heritage Listing

Victorian Heritage Register

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## Statement of Significance

Last updated on -

What is significant?

The underground public toilet for men in Queen Street, built in 1905, was the second underground public toilet built in Melbourne. It is one of a number built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century in response to increasing demands for public toilet facilities in the city that were both sanitary and discreet. The first public toilet, a urinal, had been built in 1859, following the opening of the Yan Yean water supply in 1858. But these street level toilets were regarded as indecently public, and without an underground sewerage system, the waste discharged directly into the gutters. Underground toilets, which removed toilets from public view and so satisfied contemporary perceptions of decency, 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, and the first underground public toilet in Melbourne, which included facilities for women as well as men, was opened in Russell Street in 1902. Ten others were built by 1939. The Queen Street underground toilet provoked much criticism for its public location in the heart of Melbourne's commercial precinct, demonstrating that even when located underground, public toilets continued to challenge notions of public respectability in the early twentieth century. It is still in use, and is the oldest continuously operating underground public toilet in Australia.

The Queen Street underground public toilet is located in the middle of Queen Street near the junction with Collins Street, at the centre of Melbourne's commercial precinct. It has stairways at either end leading to a below-ground space originally with five cubicles and six urinals, a store and cleaner's space. At street level the two stairways are surrounded by wrought iron railings on bluestone kerbing, and are marked by cast iron sign posts. The former pitchers and pavement lights on the pavement between the two stairways have now been removed and replaced by a concrete slab and a random coursed bluestone planter box. The interior has been remodelled, and no original internal fittings survive.

How is it significant?

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

Why is it significant?

The underground public toilet in Queen Street is of historical significance as the oldest functioning underground public toilet in Victoria, and in Australia. It was the second underground public toilet built in Melbourne, and is a reflection of an important era of sanitary, technological and social reform in the early twentieth century, of contemporary reforms in public health, and of municipal responsibility for the provision of such public facilities. It is associated with a major engineering achievement, the development of Melbourne's underground drainage and sewerage system, and the advances in sanitation and public health made possible, following the establishment of the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works. It is of historical significance as a reflection of attitudes to public

decency in the early twentieth century.

The underground public toilet in Queen 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 sign posts 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:

#### 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 Works :

**Note:** Any Minor Works that in the opinion of the Executive Director will not adversely affect the heritage

significance of the place may be exempt from the permit requirements of the Heritage Act. A person proposing to undertake minor works may submit a proposal to the Executive Director. If the Executive Director is satisfied that the proposed works will not adversely affect the heritage values of the site, the applicant may be exempted from the requirement to obtain a heritage permit. If an applicant is uncertain whether a heritage permit is required, it is recommended that the permits co-ordinator be contacted.

Construction dates        1905,  
Heritage Act Categories    Registered place,  
Hermes Number            23084  
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 began 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 1891 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 Melbourne Town Clerk and City Surveyor had obtained details of the 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.

The Queen Street underground public toilet for men was built in 1905 at the intersection with Collins Street. There was widespread opposition from the city's keepers of public morals to the siting of this structure, 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 objecting strongly 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.

Several more underground public toilets were built before World War II by the City of Melbourne. In 1907 a second underground toilet 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 (removed c1960); a men's in Elizabeth Street outside the GPO, was completed in 1910 (a women's was only added here in c1927); a women's in Collins Street beneath the Town Hall in 1914 (a men's was added c1960); and a men's in Flinders Street opposite the end of Elizabeth Street, in 1918. By 1911 then there were five underground toilets in Melbourne (Russell Street, Queen Street, Victoria Market, Swanston Street, GPO) three of which were for men only. Several more were built in the inter-war period: in Carpentaria Place (now Gordon Reserve), East Melbourne, c1924; at the corner of King and Hawke Streets, North Melbourne (designed 1938, now covered); at the corner of Faraday and Lygon Streets, Carlton (designed 1938); and in Parliament Place, East Melbourne (1939, now demolished). All of these except the one in Parliament Place had a similar above ground form, marked by an iron sign post and with the stair entrance enclosed by an iron railing and gate.

After World War II most toilets were 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 are less concerned about public decency than with safety, and being out of sight is regarded as less safe.

## Assessment Against Criteria

### *a. The historical importance, association with or relationship to Victoria's history of the place or object*

The Queen Street underground public toilet demonstrates an important era of technological and social change in Victoria. Underground public toilets were made possible by the creation of the MMBW in 1890, and the development of an underground water and sewerage system in Melbourne, a major advance in sanitation and public health in the state.

### *b. The importance of a place or object in demonstrating rarity or uniqueness*

The underground public toilet in Queen Street was the second underground public toilet in Victoria. It is the oldest continuously functioning public toilet and the second oldest public toilet in Victoria and in Australia. It is one of a group of such facilities which is unique in Australia.

### *c. The place or object's potential to educate, illustrate or provide further scientific investigation in relation to Victoria's cultural heritage*

N/A

### *d. The importance of a place or object in exhibiting the principal characteristics or the representative nature of a place or object as part of a class or type of places or objects*

The underground public toilet in Queen Street is one of a group of eleven such facilities built by the Melbourne City Council between 1902 and 1939. All have similar features, with stairs surrounded by a wrought iron railing and gate leading down to an underground convenience. They are early examples of an unusual building type, and of early twentieth century civic design.

### *e. The importance of the place or object in exhibiting good design or aesthetic characteristics and/or in exhibiting a richness, diversity or unusual integration of features*

N/A

### *f. The importance of the place or object in demonstrating or being associated with scientific or technical innovations or achievements*

The Queen Street underground public toilet is directly associated with a major advance in sanitation and public health in Victoria: the development of proper systems for water supply, drainage and sewerage, made possible

by the creation of the MMBW in 1890.

g. The importance of the place or object in demonstrating social or cultural associations

The Queen Street underground public toilet demonstrates important changes in ideas of acceptable public behaviour and perceptions of public decency during the twentieth century. The ground level public urinals erected during the nineteenth century were considered too public and undignified, and had been the subject of public complaints: underground facilities were seen as a partial solution to this problem.

h. Any other matter which the Council deems relevant to the determination of cultural heritage significance

N/A

## **Plaque Citation**

Built in 1905 this was the second 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**

1. All the building, including the stone kerbing, the iron railings, gates and posts, and the underground area, marked B1 on Diagram Number 2109 held by the Executive Director.
2. All the land marked L1 on Diagram Number 2109 held by the Executive Director.

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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/>*