

# UNDERGROUND PUBLIC TOILETS



Underground men's toilet Elizabeth St  
GPO 08 06 06 mz 036



Underground men's toilet Elizabeth St  
GPO 08 06 06 mz 028



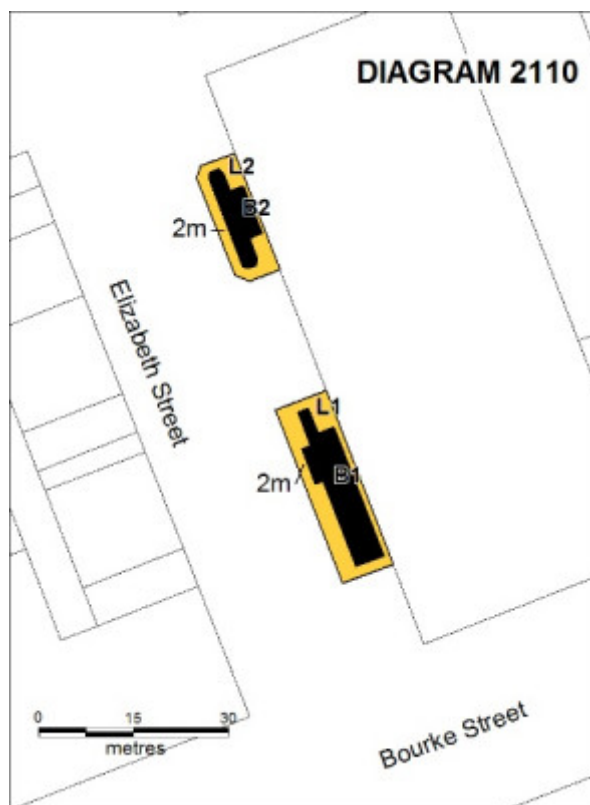
Underground men's toilet Elizabeth St  
GPO 08 06 06 mz 026



Underground women's toilet Elizabeth St  
GPO 08 06 06 mz 025



23086 Underground women's toilet  
Elizabeth St GPO 08 06 06 mz 023



H2110 elizabeth st gpo toilet

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## Location

ELIZABETH STREET MELBOURNE, Melbourne City

## Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

## Level of significance

Registered

## Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) Number

H2110

## Heritage Overlay Numbers

HO936

## 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 toilets in Elizabeth Street outside the former Melbourne GPO, the men's built in 1910 and the women's in c 1927, are part of a group built in Melbourne in the early twentieth century in response to increasing public demand for toilet facilities in the city that were both sanitary and discreet. The first public toilet in Melbourne, a urinal for men only, had been built in 1859, but these street level toilets were regarded as indecently public, and without an underground sewerage system, the waste discharged into the gutters. Underground toilets were removed from public view and so better satisfied contemporary perceptions of decency. Following the establishment in December 1890 of the Melbourne & Metropolitan Board of Works, responsible for building and maintaining an underground sewerage system, and with the precedent of similar facilities already built in Scotland, England and Sydney, the first underground public toilet in Melbourne was opened in Russell Street in 1902. It included facilities for women as well as men. This was followed by one for men only in Queen Street in 1905, a men's and women's in Elizabeth Street opposite the Victoria Market in 1907, a men's in Swanston Street in 1909, and the men's outside the GPO in 1910. The women's was not added here until seventeen years later, reflecting the lesser importance attached to such facilities for women in the city at the time. At least six other underground toilets were built by 1939 in prominent positions in and around the city. The facilities outside the GPO are still in use.

The underground public toilets in Elizabeth Street are of a similar type to the others built in the city during the first

decades of the twentieth century. Above ground elements consist of separate entry and exit stairs each for the men's and women's, surrounded by wrought iron railings and gates, with bluestone kerbing and cast iron sign posts (possibly modified). Below ground the female toilet measures 13.8m long and 3.45m wide and has eleven cubicles, eight basins and eight stools and a long mirror. The male toilet measures 4.8m long and 3.45m wide and has four cubicles, two basins and one urinal. The interiors have been continually updated since they were built and no original internal fittings survive.

Why is it significant?

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

How is it significant?

The underground public toilet in Elizabeth Street is of historical significance as one of the oldest surviving public toilets in the state, reflecting an important era of sanitary, technological and social reform in the early twentieth century. It is of historical significance as a reflection of an era of public health reform and of municipal responsibility for the provision of such public facilities, and of changing attitudes to public decency, in the early twentieth century. 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 in 1891.

The underground toilet in Elizabeth Street is of architectural significance as an early example of an unusual building type, and of early twentieth century civic design. Although the interiors have been altered the remaining railings, gates and cast iron columns are of interest as examples of street furniture of the period.

## Permit 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.

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|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Construction dates      | 1910, 1927,       |
| Heritage Act Categories | Registered place, |
| Hermes Number           | 23086             |
| 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 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.

Melbourne's 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 by the Women's Political and Social Crusade (WPSC), the Australian Health Society and the Women's Health Society. The conveniences reflect the increased involvement by women in social and political life and the movement of women from the private to the public sphere of city life.

A second underground public toilet for men was built in 1905 in Queen Street at the intersection with Collins Street. There was widespread opposition to this, as it was 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 the second facility for women was opened, and the third for men, in Elizabeth Street opposite the Victoria Market.

The fourth underground toilet for men (now demolished) was built in 1909 outside the Town Hall at the corner of Swanston and Little Collins Streets. The men's in Elizabeth Street outside the GPO was completed in 1910. The women's at the GPO was added only in 1927, reflecting the lesser importance attached to the provision of such facilities for women in the city at the time. However another women's toilet was built in Collins Street in the Town Hall basement in 1914, and another men's in Flinders Street opposite the end of Elizabeth Street in 1918.

Several more were built by the City of Melbourne in the inter-war period, all outside the centre of the city: in Carpentaria Place (now Gordon Reserve), East Melbourne (c1924: MCC plans from this year are labelled 'Proposed Women's Under-Ground Conveniences'); at the corner of King and Errol Streets, North 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). All of these except the one in Parliament Place had a similar above-ground form, with the stair entrances enclosed by an iron railing and gate.

Since then public toilets have generally been built above ground. 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.

## Assessment Against Criteria

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

The underground public toilet in Elizabeth Street reflects an important era of technological and social change in Victoria. Underground public toilets were made possible by the creation of the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works 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 Elizabeth Street was the fifth underground public toilet in Victoria, and is the third oldest of those still operating. 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 Elizabeth Street is one of a group of ten similar facilities built by the Melbourne City Council between 1902 and 1939. It is an 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 Elizabeth 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 Elizabeth Street underground public toilet demonstrates important changes in ideas of acceptable public behaviour and perceptions of public decency during the early 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. However following World War II attitudes to public decency changed and issues of safety became more important and few underground public toilets were built.

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

N/A

## **Plaque Citation**

This men's underground toilet was built in 1910, the women's in 1927. They reflect an important era of sanitary and technological reform in Melbourne and demonstrate contemporary attitudes to public decency.

## **Extent of Registration**

1. All the buildings marked B1 and B2 on Diagram Number 2110 held by the Executive Director. This includes the stone kerbing, the iron railings, gates and posts, and the underground area.

2. All the land marked L1 and L2 on Diagram Number 2110 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/>*