
Underground Public Conveniences Group



B6802 Underground Public Conveniences

Location

Collins, Elizabeth, Flinders, Queen and Russell Streets,, MELBOURNE VIC 3000 - Property No B6802

Municipality

MELBOURNE CITY

Level of significance

National

Heritage Listing

National Trust

Statement of Significance

Last updated on - October 6, 2005

Statement of Significance. Melbourne's underground conveniences are of social and architectural significance at a national level as an unrivalled and distinctive central-city grouping reflective of an important era of sanitary, technological and social reform in the first decades of the twentieth century. The collection includes Melbourne's first underground toilet, Melbourne's first public toilet for women, Melbourne's oldest extant public toilet, and Australia's oldest known underground toilet. Their historical associations are significant in relation to the achievement of gender equality, architectural uniqueness, sanitary reform, as evidence of a heritage of public street life and of the transformation of aesthetic values. The period of their construction was characterised by a major transformation of the historical rationale behind the elaboration of public space, of which they are a significant and lasting record. The existence of the conveniences as a specialised facility of everyday public life mark them as a unique social artefact with broad historical associations. The provision of underground toilets in this era was seen as an explicit principle of the Garden City ideals. The strong associations of the female conveniences as a particular outcome of the political and social agenda of first-wave feminists mark them as

highly symbolic sites. The first male public urinal in Melbourne had been constructed in 1859, and it was over forty years before women's conveniences were allocated in the city streets. The establishment of the underground conveniences was due in large measure to the strenuous petitions of first-wave feminist groups (the Women's Political and Social Crusade, the Women's Political Association of Victoria), and prominent individuals including political and social activist Vida Goldstein were active in the campaign for such facilities. The timing of their construction is strongly associated not only with the achievement of women's political representation, but as an outcome of Melbourne's Commonwealth Celebrations and Royal Visit in 1901. The first underground conveniences were designed by City Surveyor Adrien C Mountain, and had been preceded in the immediate decade before by similar facilities in Scotland, England and Sydney. Despite the successive remodelling of interior and above-ground fittings, they remain unique because of the very nature of their siting and structural envelope. The conveniences are significant as illustrative of advanced sanitary technologies and public health reform. The provision of underground conveniences for women especially reflected advances in sanitary and medical knowledge as well as technological possibilities provided by the recent introduction of the sewerage system to Melbourne. The existence of Melbourne's underground toilets is testimony to a heritage of public street life and is evidence of a past era of municipal responsibility for the provision of such public facilities. The era of their creation reflects a pivotal moment in the transformation of urban public space and indeed of the definition of the urban "public", and their continued existence uniquely contributes to an understanding of moral and aesthetic values that saw not only a changing threshold of acceptable behaviour in relation to urination in public, but a reconceptualisation of the street as unobstructed, sanitised and respectable space.

Classified: 05/05/1997

See also B6720 Russell Street Underground Convenience and B6791 Underground Convenience, Parliament Place Reserve, Parliament Place, Macarthur Street & St Andrews Place.

Hermes Number 64746

Property Number

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/>