

What Lies Beneath? Dunedin's Public Conveniences and their Subterranean Origins.

Alison Breese, Dunedin City Council

Abstract: Turn-of-the-century public conveniences in New Zealand are becoming a rare and endangered part of our wider cultural and built heritage. These often overlooked structures are more than just reminders of a common public service, but provide direct evidence for changing social attitudes to the provision of public conveniences and evidence for changing architectural and aesthetic approaches to their design, construction and visibility. This paper provides examples taken from Dunedin's rich history and heritage of public conveniences to examine these social changes.

The first public facilities were built by the Dunedin Town Board, the predecessor to the Dunedin City Council. They were built in the 1860s in Princes Street, by the Post Office, and in Jetty Street. By 1906 there were 10 conveniences in the City - for men only. In 1909 a Councillor reported to a Council meeting that the public facilities were "particularly unpleasant places". Others labelled them a "disgrace"¹.

Although local Dunedin department stores provided rest rooms for women, there were no public conveniences for women before 1908. Women were considered not to be in the public space as often as men, and so less in need of conveniences². The first toilets built for women by Dunedin City Council were in the Tramways building at St Clair in 1908. This was a very popular family destination, especially once tram travel had become more common.

By 1909 Dunedin City Council had decided to build two underground conveniences in Dunedin. There was general concern over the filthiness of the city and the poor level of hygiene. New conveniences were seen as a matter of urgency. Plans for an underground convenience under Cargill's Monument in Custom House Square had first been discussed in 1900. It was not until 1910, however, that the money was appropriated to the cause³. Two locations were chosen for their central situation and, just as importantly, their seclusion. The first selected site was under the lower Octagon reserve under the Chapman's

¹ *Otago Daily Times*, 27 August, 1909, page 2

² "Rooms of Their Own: Public Toilets and Gendered Citizens in a New Zealand City 1860-1940", Annabel Cooper, Robin Law, Jane Malthus and Pamela Wood, 2000 in *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, page 426

³ Dunedin City Council (DCC) Archives, Town Clerk Series, Public Works Committee Minutes, 4/1, 26 July 1900, Book 9

Monument. The second was under the back of Cargill's Monument in Custom House Square (now known as the Exchange)⁴.

The first underground conveniences in the world were built in 1855 in London. Flush toilets came into public use the following decade. So Dunedin's new subterranean facilities were seen as modern and up to date with trends in Europe. And, perhaps most importantly, they were out of sight⁵.

As well as being practically invisible, the Dunedin's undergrounds conveniences or 'Comfort Stations', as they were termed, were designed to be aesthetically pleasing. The interiors in the Octagon's facilities were fitted with wall to ceiling white tiles, ornamental skirting, dado and enriched with cornice tiles⁶. Everything was ordered in white. There were also electric heaters and looking glasses installed⁷.

The 'Ladies' entrance to the Octagon convenience was a particular source of pride for one local engineer – the passage into it was sheltered by shrubbery for privacy. In a 1919 report he commented that there should be more of this type of convenience around the city for women⁸. The Gentlemen's conveniences were open from 7am-11pm daily. The Ladies had shorter opening hours than the men's – from 8:30am, closing at 9pm⁹. Within months of opening in 1911, the Octagon and Custom House Square underground facilities had over 46,000 patrons a month¹⁰.

The urinals and water closets for the undergrounds were imported by Dunedin contractors from the Twyford Company, England¹¹. Twyford had worked closely with Thomas Crapper in the first designs of the flush toilets in the 1860s. The Octagon conveniences had 10 urinals, 4 water closets and lavatory for men and the women had 4 water closets and lavatory. Both had accommodation for an attendant¹².

The cost for water closets was a penny – although the men's urinals were free. Payment was made through a Penny in the Slot system (however there were higher charges for use of "extra" services such as permission to use the looking glass)¹³. In one four week period, the conveniences raised £28 for the Council¹⁴.

The second site for new underground conveniences was in Customhouse Square, now known as the Exchange. It was for men only and they were located below the Cargill's

⁴ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-1911, 9 September 1909

⁵ DCC Archives, City of Dunedin Departmental Report 1905/6, pp 23-24

⁶ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11, 16 February 1911

⁷ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11, 5 June 1911

⁸ DCC Archives, City Engineers Series Correspondence, Volume 18, 1919-1928, Comfort Stations

⁹ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11, 5 June 1911, 26 May 1911

¹⁰ *Otago Daily Times*, 2 February 1911, page 6

¹¹ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11, 2 February 1910

¹² DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11, 4 November 1910

¹³ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11, 11 January 1911

¹⁴ *Otago Daily Times*, 2 February 1911, page 6

Monument in the central business district. They were the busiest of the three undergrounds, had 10 urinals, 2 water closets and accommodation for an attendant¹⁵.

The Customhouse Square site was the only convenience to cause issues. Cargill's Monument was often a site for orators and political speeches. This made it difficult, on occasion, for people to make their way through the crowd to access the toilets. The City Engineer noted however, that people were quite happy to sit around and discuss the events of the day on this site, and not put off by the proximity of a public convenience¹⁶.

A 1919 report noted that the Customhouse Square site was also a problem because of men who had undergone, what was euphemistically termed, "bar treatment". As one contemporary explained: "The treatment is said to affect their minds and paralyse their bodies to some extent. They fill up the underground place and are complained of as bringing in alcoholic pandemonium of vulgarity, obscenity, and blasphemy to the loathing and disgust of the officer in charge"¹⁷.

A third comfort station was built in London Street outside the Albert Arms Hotel and, again, was built for men only. While these subterranean spaces were designed with modernity and privacy in mind, the challenges of being underground meant they had to be constructed to withstand the traffic load. The roof was designed to meet this and the walls and floors needed to be watertight to hold back the water table and rainwater. Water from the street had to be stopped from running down the stairs and when it did flood, the water had to be pumped out. Artificial light was also required and the spaces all had skylights and pavement lights¹⁸.

The London Street toilets were closed due to general deterioration and inadequacy and were shut in 1964¹⁹. The space was then offered to the Electricity Department and has been used ever since as an underground substation.

By 1919, the Council moved towards building more above ground facilities. The Manor Place conveniences, built in 1912, still stand today. They were described by the City Engineer in 1919 as an "object of beauty, draped as it is in lovely native shrubs"²⁰ – the shrubbery was even more important to the aesthetics of an above ground station, providing concealment for self-conscious patrons.

The King Edward Street public conveniences were also above ground. They were situated in the Kensington area and had a visiting attendant, rather than one stationed on the

¹⁵ Dunedin City Council Archives, City Engineers Series Correspondence, Volume 18, 1919-1928, Comfort Stations

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11 and City Engineer plans 14/2/2

¹⁹ DCC Archives, City Engineers Correspondence Series, 1964-67, 59/5/4

²⁰ Dunedin City Council Archives, City Engineers Series Correspondence, Volume 18, 1919-1928, Comfort Stations

premises. A nearby property owner tried to call a halt to the construction of the King Edward Street public convenience as it was being built nearby his new building. His lawyers advised the Dunedin City Council that their client felt disgraced and did not want his lady customer's eyes and noses offended by the public convenience being so close. The building owner made a "request that Council will not carry out the intention of erecting so "nasty" a place in such close proximity to his premises"²¹. His petitions went unheeded.

As well as underground and above ground conveniences, the Council also provided semi-underground toilets. The Crawford Street semi-undergrounds provided convenience for people attending the shows and events at the nearby Agriculture Hall and His Majesty's Theatre. Sited in the middle of the street, the toilets caused headaches for patrons and Council alike as patrons exited straight into oncoming traffic. Only a raised concrete path around the toilet separated patrons from the busy two way street and a number of accidents and injuries resulted²². Indeed a City Engineers 1941 report outlined one incident where a truck rammed into the convenience causing extensive damage²³. In response, it was suggested that a railing be built around the convenience to prevent people from walking straight into traffic. The conveniences had opened in 1924 but were removed in 1949, after finally being deemed too dangerous.

In the 1960s the underground toilets began to lose favour. New above ground concrete block conveniences were more accessible and more cost efficient. Significantly, changing social attitudes meant there was no longer a need to have toilets out of sight, underground or hidden by shrubs²⁴. In 1965, when the Star Fountain was erected, the Octagon underground conveniences were remodelled and tiled²⁵. The women's section was reported as "disused" in Council reports, so the men's conveniences were further extended into the ladies space. The skylights were covered with grass to surround the fountain. The railing was also removed around this time²⁶.

Underground conveniences began to disappear in the 1960s. In 1962, the Exchange toilets were filled in, after being officially closed in 1961. Their closure was part of the 1960-61 discussion over the demolition and removal of Cargill's Monument²⁷. The road was realigned and flower beds covered the filled-in conveniences. The Monument survived.

In 1968 the Dunedin Rotary Club prepared a report titled "How convenient are the conveniences?" which they submitted to Dunedin City Council. One complaint was of the lack of privacy and small stall doors - "the vision of a row of half-mast nether garments is

²¹ DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, U/1, 1910-11

²² DCC Archives, Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence, General, C/2, 1941

²³ DCC Archives, City Engineers Correspondence Series, 1938-44, Conveniences, 1941

²⁴ DCC Archives, City Engineers Correspondence Series, 1964-1967, 59/5/4

²⁵ DCC Archives, City Engineers Correspondence Series, 1964-1967, 59/5/3

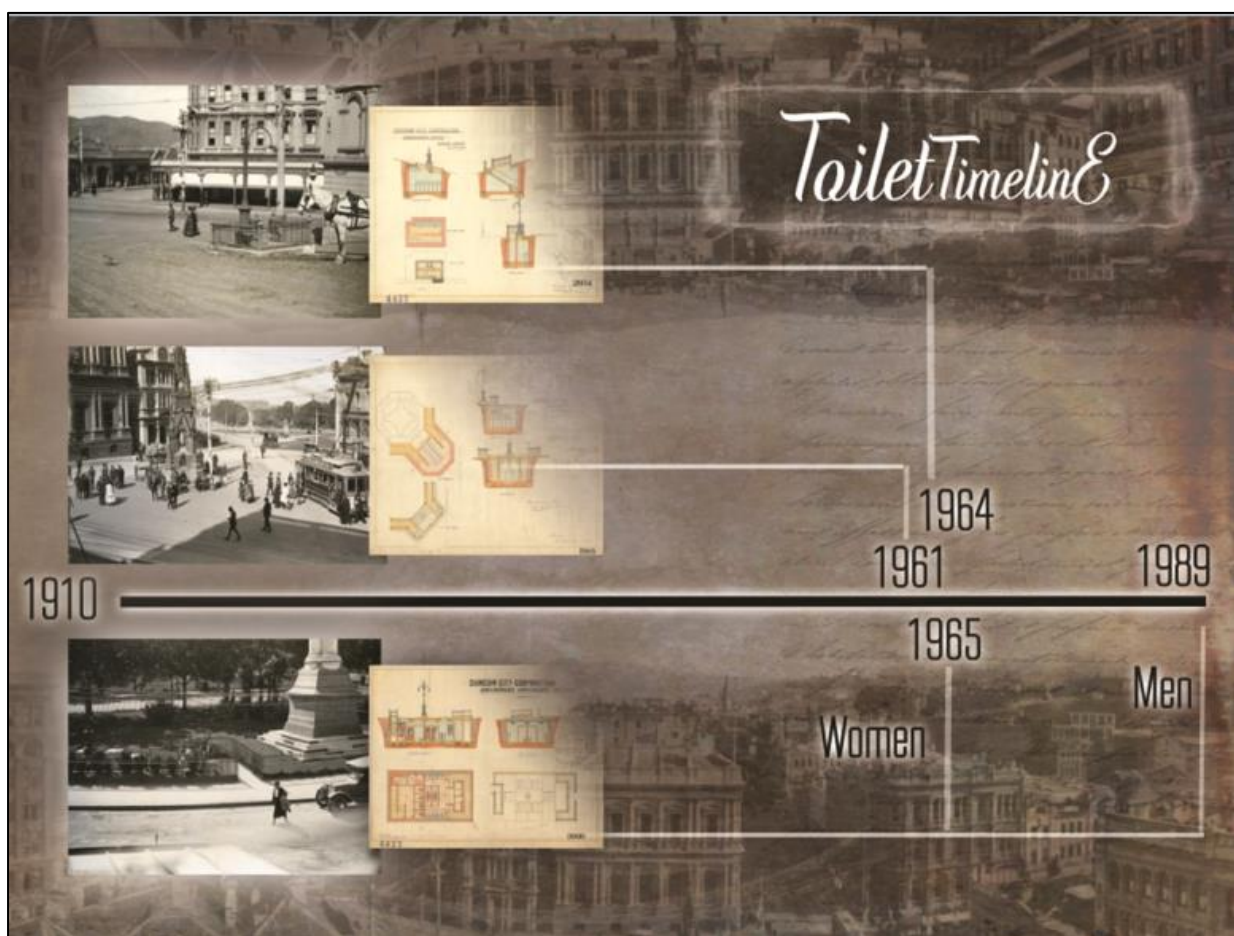
²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ DCC Archives, City Engineers Correspondence Series, 1968-70, 59/5/4

not a very elevating sight for casual users of the convenience”²⁸. The other complaint concerned the terrible condition of the public conveniences.

The last underground men’s-only toilet in the Octagon closed in 1989 with a major redevelopment of the site. The roof was broken in, the walls were cut down and filled in and sealed²⁹.

Dunedin’s early public conveniences were subterranean spaces that protected Victorian modesty and yet were modern and state-of-the-art in their design and construction. They survived for over fifty years in the city, before visible, above ground conveniences became the norm as societal and aesthetic attitudes towards the humble convenience evolved.



²⁸ DCC Archives, City Engineers Correspondence Series, 1968-70, 59/5/3

²⁹ DCC Archives, City Engineer Contract Specification, 1989