

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

Art & Design 27: Architecture

August 2024

Interventions

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1027017>

THE STORY OF A SIMPLE TOILET:
WHAT A FORGOTTEN STRUCTURE CAN TELL US ABOUT
THE ARCHITECTURAL, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND

Alison Breese

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors;

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

THE STORY OF A SIMPLE TOILET: WHAT A FORGOTTEN STRUCTURE CAN TELL US ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURAL, CULTURAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF NEW ZEALAND

Alison Breese

The time of the people climbing downstairs and disappearing into the earth should be over.

Iona Williams, Dunedin City Councillor, 1987

Along Princes Street, Dunedin, nestled by a public reserve, a small structure sits, surrounded by a small ornamental garden. Many passersby do not know what the structure is, or why it is there. Although small and seemingly unremarkable, it remains as the last Edwardian public toilet in New Zealand and has recently gained an entry on the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Heritage List. It is a tangible link to the architectural and historical significance of public conveniences and remains as physical evidence of a once common facility. It is indicative of an early-twentieth-century response to sanitation and hygiene needs, as well as what was acceptable behaviour in the public sphere. Ignored for many years, the Manor Place Convenience is a piece of important built heritage.

Social perceptions of these public spaces changed drastically over the twentieth century, and their architectural design was heavily influenced by society's expectations. Considerations of hygiene and cleanliness, while being at the forefront of their design, saw public toilets (as we now know them) develop into 'architectural superstructures,' being moved underground and concealed in the early twentieth century. Within 50 years, these underground spaces fell out of favour as above-ground conveniences became the norm as societal and aesthetic attitudes towards the humble public convenience evolved. Through the lens of historical scholarship, this article outlines how sanitation and technology, as well as social expectations and safety factors, influenced and shaped the design of publicly provided facilities, with a particular focus on Dunedin as a case study.

The first public toilet facilities were built by the Dunedin Town Board, the predecessor of the Dunedin City Council, in the 1860s. Public urination was illegal, and the town board sought to provide public urinals for residents and travellers. Only two were built, and those were for men.¹ Early designs were purely functional – they were plumbed with a simple iron screening for privacy.



Figure 1. Manor Place Conveniences
February 2023.
Photograph: by author for Heritage New Zealand
Pouhere Taonga.

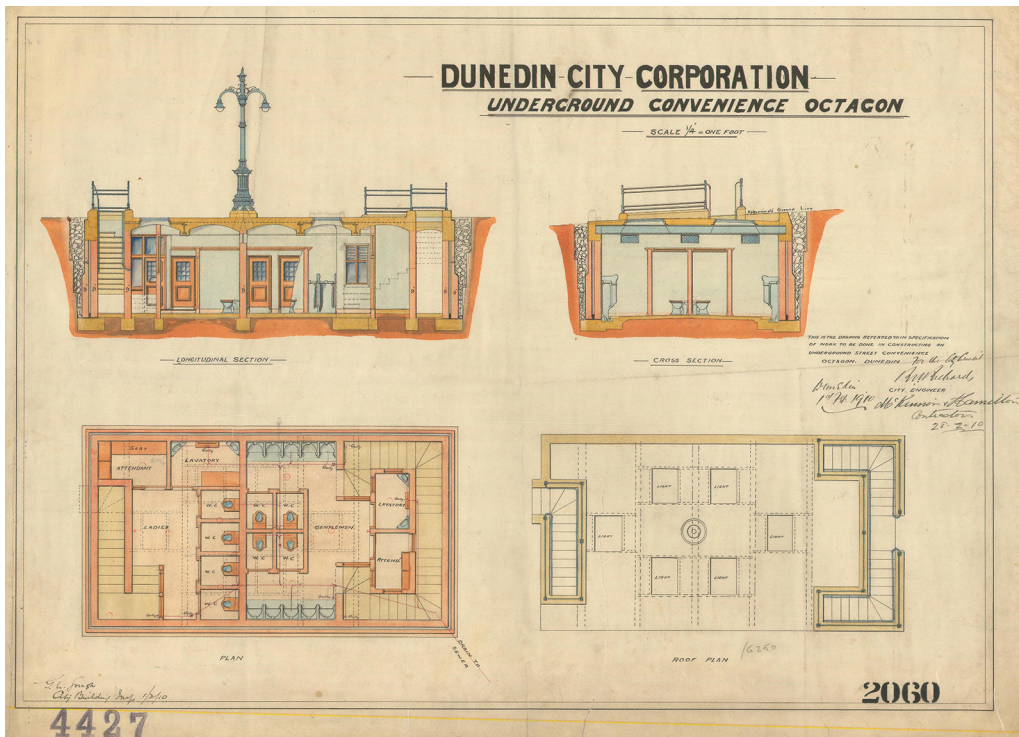


Figure 2. The Underground Conveniences, Octagon, 1910, City Engineer's plan I4/2/2 (b), Dunedin City Council (DCC) Archives.

Urinals were built in European cities from the 1840s so that people could privately and hygienically relieve themselves during normal everyday travel in public spaces.² Removal of the sights, sounds and smells of common bodily functions was seen as all-important. Further removing natural functions from the bustle of crowds, subterranean facilities were becoming popular as they were completely out of sight. The first underground public conveniences in the world were built in 1855 and shown by George Jennings at the Great Exhibition, London.³ These underground spaces, as well as the first flush toilet (which came into public use from the 1860s), were seen as symbols of the scientific and technological achievements of the nineteenth century.

In New Zealand by the early 1900s there were no 'modern' underground toilets until the first one was constructed in Christchurch in 1907.⁴ Hampered by fiscal restraints, the Dunedin City Council built their first underground conveniences in 1909.

In a bid to convince the local authority to build underground conveniences, Richard Richards, the Dunedin City Council's town clerk and city engineer (a dual role), argued that underground structures had displaced the "unsightly arrangements" of above-ground facilities in Europe.⁵ He argued that Dunedin had many open spaces that were well adapted for the construction of underground conveniences. Having such facilities would enable Dunedin to build a reputation as a well-kept, well-appointed modern city, qualities which the public and local authority alike deemed important.⁶

Dunedin's underground conveniences or comfort stations, as they were termed, were designed to be both aesthetically pleasing and state-of-the-art in design.⁷ Urinals and closets were sourced from the Twyford company, England. Twyford's were among the first of the major sanitarians in England and their inventions were hailed as landmarks of domestic sanitary reform.⁸

Water closet and urinal styles changed from the fancy, decorative style of the Victorian age to reflect a more austere, functional approach in the early twentieth century. Interiors were plainer, with more rounded designs. Water closets were now clean and uncluttered, and lavatories were more discreet, raised on simple pedestals. There were practical reasons for this, including the reality that they were easier to clean. The urinals were made from porcelain-enameled fireclay with an automatic flush cistern, developed in 1889. These became extremely popular around the world, including in New Zealand.

A simple colour palette was also favoured, and the interiors of these underground facilities were fitted with wall-to-ceiling tiles, skirting and dados and enriched with cornice tiles. The Manor Place Convenience, built in 1912 above ground, also had a frieze with Art Nouveaux-style green tiles, which still exist in the structure today.

Other aesthetic elements included the woodwork. The cupboards and towel rollers were made from kauri and all the joinery work was completed in Tasmanian wood.⁹ The seats in the attendants' spaces were also made from kauri and there were brass coat and hat hooks, as well as electric heaters and looking glasses installed.

While these spaces were designed with modernity and privacy in mind, the challenges of being underground meant they had to be constructed to withstand their subterranean environment. Roofs were designed to withstand the traffic load and the walls and floors needed to be watertight to hold back the water table and rainwater.¹⁰ Despite this planning, Dunedin's underground facilities did suffer from leaks, with some causing issues as early as 1912.¹¹

Ventilation and lighting were very important in these underground spaces. The toilets had uptake ventilation pipes up to the streets above. These were necessary fixtures but were also decorative features, with the cast-iron bases of the ventilation pillars displaying ornamental patterns. As well as the artificial light, these spaces all had skylights to let the natural light in and pavement lights with glass lens lights.¹² Outside, gas lamps and later electric lights were used to light the accessway and stairs, and were left burning all night.

MANOR PLACE CONVENIENCE – THE LAST ONE STANDING

A convenience was demanded by residents of the Manor Place area in 1912; they were concerned about the existing urinal's aesthetics within the cityscape and its offensiveness to members of the public. Residents called for an underground convenience for both sexes.¹³ The DCC's Chief Building Surveyor, George W Gough (1863-1936), agreed with the petitioners that a modern structure should replace the old one, built in 1876. Using dedicated funds allocated in 1909 for building underground conveniences, the council agreed to a less popular option – an above-ground convenience for men only.¹⁴

Augustine Ferry (1850-1939) won the contract to build the Manor Place Convenience. He had already successfully undertaken the contracts for the two main underground conveniences at Custom House Square and London Street. All three structures were to make use of Twyford stoneware and designs.¹⁵ The design of the Manor Place structure was drawn up by City Building Surveyor Gough.

The decorative tiles used in the Manor Place Convenience included a frieze of a distinctive acanthus leaf design in the British Art Nouveau style. A similar design was used in London Underground railway stations from 1906.¹⁶ The steady rise of English tile manufacture began early in the Victorian era and reached its height between 1880 and 1900. The push for cleanliness and public health popularised tiles as a surface that could be easily cleaned and sanitised, and all Dunedin public conveniences built from 1910 utilised ceramic tiles. While not rare at the time, being used in numerous public buildings, the Manor Place cladding has become a rare survivor in New Zealand of Edwardian Art Nouveau tiles.

In 1919, the city engineer described the Manor Place structure as an "object of beauty, draped as it is in lovely native shrubs."¹⁷ Commenting on the various urinals constructed in the 1870s, one councillor exclaimed how disgusted he

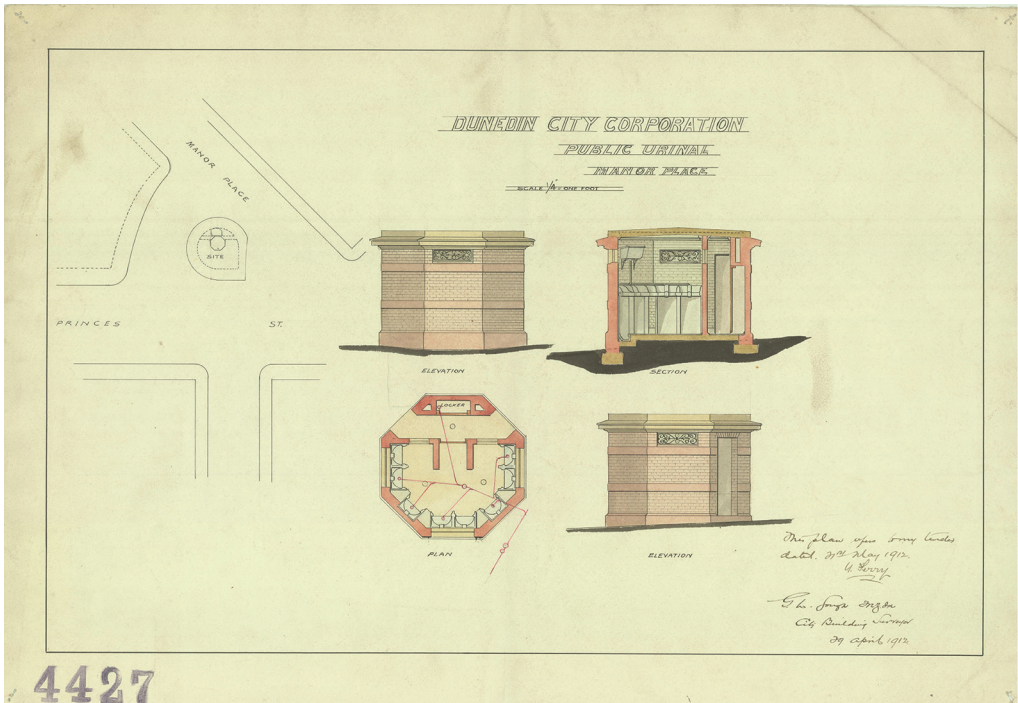


Figure 3. Manor Place Public Urinal plans, 1912, City Engineers Series, 12/2/2d, DCC Archives.

was, as they were too exposed to the street.¹⁸ Shrubbery was used to cover and hide these structures from public view and provide concealment for self-conscious patrons; however, this move inadvertently increased opportunities for anti-social behaviour.

ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

Urinals could be dangerous places. In 1902, a urinal at the Dowling Street steps on Princes Street comprised a narrow passage with five chambers and a single entrance and exit; a writer to the local newspapers wrote that it could become a "garrotting chamber."¹⁹ After damage to the Manor Place Convenience in 1913, "Open Door" wrote to the local paper saying that the inwards-swinging doors should be removed: "the very fact that there are such unscrupulous persons frequenting the place shows how necessary it is that the line of retreat should be kept open. Fancy a man bursting in on one or more of these gentry at nightfall and figure out his chances of escape if they set on him."²⁰ Being an enclosed space, the Manor Place Convenience was also reported to be littered with broken bottles – evidence of "the use to which such places are put."²¹ These spaces could be dangerous for the public to use, with multiple cases of abuse and assaults.²² Antisocial behaviour in the Manor Place environs was reported in the local court news. Dunedin's central city underground conveniences often provoked complaints of young men, under the influence of liquor; drinking in the toilet spaces and blocking the entrance and exits. Attendants were also assaulted.²³

As a way of curbing this anti-social behaviour; in the mid-1950s the council planned to situate new conveniences in prominent places in the hope that the vandalism and mistreatment would stop.²⁴ By this time, most of its toilet buildings and conveniences were outdated and the council planned to gradually replace the older facilities, though it was "difficult to provide modern facilities in the face of continued mistreatment of these public utilities."²⁵



Figure 4. Manor Place Convenience 1919,
City Engineers Correspondence, Vol 18, DCC Archives.

Public conveniences for men often served other functions. While I have found no documentary evidence indicating that the Manor Place Convenience was a place of encounter, or 'beat,' for homosexual men, there is evidence for other male public toilets in Dunedin. Public toilets have historically been a popular beat (a sex-on-site venue) for men interested in men and there are reports of other Dunedin public toilets being used in this way, such as the Rattray Street urinal or the facilities in Queens Gardens.²⁶ There is a strong likelihood that situated in a relatively isolated part of the city, surrounded by trees, the Manor Place Convenience would have been a place of sexual encounter.

GENDERED STRUCTURES

Although London built the first underground conveniences in the world in 1855, it was another 40 years before women got their first conveniences, in the form of a dual-sex facility.²⁷ Dunedin women had to wait until 1910.

Women's organisations around the world were lobbying for access to public spaces, recognising the connection between access to public facilities for women and their place in wider society.²⁸ According to historian Caroline Daley, the lack of public toilets for women reinforced the idea that they were unwanted, unassimilated to the urban environment.²⁹ In Dunedin, "Ratepayer," writing to the *Evening Star*, noted that "many other deficiencies mark Dunedin, and particularly so in regard to public conveniences for both sexes. This city is utterly lacking in even the most common conveniences in this respect."³⁰ Given prevailing social attitudes towards acceptance of women in the public sphere, a more pressing issue for local authorities was the cost needed to build women's facilities. Providing water closets for women was more expensive than men-only facilities, as more units were needed. In an analysis of the London dual facility in 1895, Sarah McCabe noted that it cost 175 percent more to build this type compared with men-only conveniences.³¹

While the Octagon underground convenience was a great step forward in providing spaces in public for women, it continued to be the only public convenience supplied by the council in the central city during the early twentieth century. The Manor Place Convenience is an example of this gendered divide; while the public had petitioned for a dual-sex facility, fiscal and social restraints meant that a men-only facility was built.³²

Water closets for women were more expensive to build and use than men's facilities. Women's underground toilets cost more in general to construct, due to the space needed for water closets and lavatories. They also cost money to use, with penny-in-the-slot systems – men had access to free urinals, but women had to pay to use the water closets. Narrow, steep stairways also caused accessibility issues: "why should it be necessary to ascend steep stairs to them – which elderly women and mothers with babies and small children find difficulty in climbing?" argued one writer to the local newspaper in 1939.³³

The mid-1920s saw many women's groups lobbying council for 'modern' restrooms for the city. There was a societal shift in attitude as women became more accepted in public life, with facilities being provided for mothers. Restrooms were larger and more elaborate facilities than standard toilets, offering a wide range of services. The idea of 'rest' was linked to ideals of maternity, providing spaces to change babies' nappies, heat feeding bottles and generally have a rest from the public space.³⁴ Modern restrooms were inclusive spaces – they were easily accessible, preferably situated on a ground floor and provided wider services than just a water closet accessed down steep, narrow stairs underground when a person was in need. Across New Zealand, new toilet buildings took on a homelier appearance, drawing from the Arts and Crafts and bungalow styles of architecture. This relaxed, comfortable style reflected the new practices and ideas around public toilets for women.³⁵

The demand for more women's public conveniences was part of a worldwide trend as women's organisations demanded improved access to public spaces. While some overseas campaigns strove for years to get local authorities to build public facilities for women, in New Zealand, women's groups and associations ran the facilities themselves. They organised, fundraised and ran their own restrooms and creches for local people, with some council support.³⁶ With increased numbers using restrooms, in Dunedin, the Women's Rest Room Committee continued to improve these spaces by installing radio sets, electric water heaters and new furniture.

MODERN TOILETS

An investigation into replacing all Dunedin's underground conveniences with more modern structures at footpath level was initiated in 1957. "These have served the city for about 50 years and are subject to considerable vandalism,"³⁷ The investigation showed it had become increasingly difficult to maintain the underground facilities to the required standard due largely to the difficulty in attracting suitable employees for the role of attendant. The council agreed with the chief city health inspector's report that every effort should be made to replace the underground conveniences with more modern structures situated at ground-floor level. This was a shift in thinking – no longer was the underground convenience favoured due to being 'hidden' away from the public's eyes. Indeed, it was the fact it was hidden away which created problems, with high rates of vandalism and abuse. This led to a dramatic change in architectural style for public facilities. The council agreed that "every effort should be made to replace these buildings with more modern structures at ground floor level." As a result, within 50 years the city's underground conveniences had become surplus and unwanted.³⁸

Against a backdrop of architectural changes in 1960s Dunedin, existing public conveniences were slowly demolished. Victorian-style buildings were becoming undesirable and costly to upkeep. Many government and local government buildings in Dunedin were demolished during this decade and, in their place, new multi-storied buildings were erected. Along with this new building design trend, the design of public conveniences also evolved. Stainless steel became a prominent material, replacing porcelain. All piping and workings to the toilet were concealed to prevent damage and vandalism. Public toilets became free to use, further increasing accessibility, as the penny-in-the-slot system was retired during this decade. The last remaining underground site in the Octagon survived the 1960s, but it was a shadow of its former architectural glory.



Figure 5. Botanic Gardens Entrance with new Public Toilets 1968,
Architect Series, Album 'Parks and Rec 2, DCC Archives.

Across New Zealand, early underground conveniences have evolved into newer designs, with no originals remaining today, heightening the importance of the Manor Place Convenience. Unsurprisingly, no interior photos of Dunedin toilets are extant before the 1960s to allow us to see what these spaces were like. Looking at the original contract specifications and correspondence, and the remaining Manor Place urinal (built by the same contractor as the underground facilities, and with the same materials), we can construct a picture of the demolished toilets. Part of my Masters thesis involved creating a Virtual Reality space to enable the rich history of these seemingly simple spaces to be told.³⁹

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. Social perceptions of these spaces changed drastically over the twentieth century. Heavily influenced by current architectural trends, their design evolved as local authorities tried to curb the excessive costs resulting from damage and vandalism and the phasing out of attendants' positions – factors which led to the demise of these underground spaces. They survived for over 50 years in the city, before visible, above-ground conveniences became the norm as societal and aesthetic attitudes towards the public convenience evolved.

Alison Breese is a Heritage Assessment Advisor for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga and historian for Museograph. She has had over 20 years' experience in research and completed the first digital Master of History at University of Otago, 2020. Her passion project focuses on historic toilets and their built heritage.

- 1 Pamela J Wood, *Dirt: Filth and Decay in a New World Arcadia* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2005), 1.
- 2 Andrew Israel Ross, "Dirty Desire: The Uses and Misuses of Public Urinals in Nineteenth-century Paris," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 53:1 (2009), 62-88, at 81.
- 3 Sarah McCabe, "The Provision of Underground Public Conveniences in London with Reference to Gender Differentials, 1850s-1980s" (MA thesis, University of London, 2012), 18.
- 4 "Municipal Reform – Provision of Underground Conveniences," *Otago Daily Times*, 27 August 1909, 2, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19090827.2.7>.
- 5 Richard Richards was born in Wales in 1863 and came to New South Wales, Australia, as a child. In 1879 he joined the Sydney City Council as an articled surveyor in the City Surveyor's Department and became a surveyor and draughtsman. He was city surveyor for 13 years from 1887 to 1901. Richards was commissioned by the council to visit Europe from 1896 to 1897 to report on various aspects of municipal government. He was a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers, England, and president of the Local Government Engineers Institute of NSW. In 1902, he retired to work in private practice as a civil and consulting engineer. He took an appointment as the town clerk of Dunedin, New Zealand, from 1904 to 1911, before returning to council service in Sydney. Sir Richard Richards was created a Knight Bachelor in 1920. See "Richard Watkins Richards," Sydney's Aldermen, *City of Sydney*, <https://www.sydneyaldermen.com.au/alderman/richard-richards/> (accessed 29 February 2024).
- 6 "A Deserving Cause," *Otago Daily Times*, 7 July 1906, <https://bit.ly/2ZAhLt6>.
- 7 This was a euphemistic term used in council correspondence, but failed to catch on with the public.
- 8 James Denley, *A History of Twyford's 1680-1982*, <https://twyfordshistory.blogspot.com/p/denley-history.html> (p. 9).
- 9 "Contract 93 and 233 – Public Conveniences, 1910," City Engineer Contract File 3/3, Dunedin City Council Archives (hereinafter DCC Archives).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Town Clerk Series 33 Correspondence (TC33), 1912, General, U/1 and 1919, General C/4, DCC Archives.
- 12 "Contract 93 and 233," DCC Archives.
- 13 TC33 1912, General, U/1, Letter 1085, DCC Archives.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 TC33, 1912, General, U/1, DCC Archives.
- 16 Daniel Wright, "The Green Agenda (Leslie Green Underground Stations, London, UK)," *The Beauty of Transport*, blog post, 9 October 2013, <https://thebeautyoftransport.com/2013/10/09/the-green-agenda-leslie-green-underground-stations-london-uk/> (accessed November 2022).
- 17 City Engineers Correspondence, Vol. 18, 1919-1928, DCC Archives.
- 18 City Council, "The Urinals," *Evening Star*, 19 December 1874, 1 (Supplement).
- 19 *Otago Daily Times*, 14 March 1903, 8.
- 20 "Wilful Damage," *Evening Star*, 2 August 1913, 6.
- 21 TC33, 1925 GEN C/2, Letter 4757, DCC Archives.
- 22 TC33, 1920 GEN C/3, Letter 7260, DCC Archives.
- 23 Ibid; DCC Minutes, Town Clerk 1, 1922-24, p. 436, DCC Archives.
- 24 "Dunedin City Council Annual Report 1955-56," DCC Archives.
- 25 "Dunedin City Council Annual Report 1957-58," DCC Archives.

- 26 Welby Ings, "A Convenient Exchange: Discourses Between Physical, Legal and Linguistic Frameworks Impacting on the New Zealand Public Toilet," *Public Space: the Journal of Law and Social Justice*, 1:1 (2007), 1-44; Chris Brickell, "Queens Gardens, 1949: The Anxious Spaces of Post-war New Zealand Masculinity," *New Zealand Geographer*, 68:2 (2012), 81-91.
- 27 McCabe, "Provision," 19; Caroline Daley, "Flushed with Pride? Women's Quest for Public Toilets in New Zealand," *Women's Studies Journal*, 16 (2000), 95-113, at 96.
- 28 "The White Elephant," *Otago Daily Times*, 4 August 1906, 95.
- 29 Daley, "Flushed with Pride?," 96.
- 30 Pro Bono Publico, "Wanted, Public Conveniences for Both Sexes – To the Editor," *Evening Star*, 5 July 1906, 3.
- 31 McCabe, "Provision," 34.
- 32 Annabel Cooper, Robin Law, Jane Malthus and Pamela Wood, "Rooms of Their Own: Public Toilets and Gendered Citizens in a New Zealand City, 1860-1940," *Gender, Place & Culture*, 7:4 (2000), 417-33.
- 33 *Otago Daily Times*, 29 April 1939, 21.
- 34 Cooper et al., "Rooms of Their Own," 428.
- 35 Kate Jordan, *Women's Rest Rooms, James Lane, New Plymouth – Conservation Plan*, 2017, <https://kateljordan.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/womens-rest-rooms-new-plymouth-conservation-plan-pdf-version-1.pdf> (p. 4).
- 36 Daley, "Flushed with Pride?"
- 37 City Engineers Series Correspondence, 1956-59, 59/51, 8 April 1957, DCC Archives.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Alison Breese, "How Convenient are our Conveniences? The Demise of the Underground Facilities in Dunedin 1910-1980s" (MA thesis, University of Otago, 2019); Virtual Reality Tour of the Octagon Underground Conveniences, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/conveniences/43-virtual-reality-tour-of-the-octagon-underground-conveniences>.