

‘Taj Mahal’ Public Conveniences (former)

Opposite 10 Cambridge Terrace



Photo: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- Built in 1928, the Taj Mahal is a small, single storey building constructed as a simple Raj-influenced, stripped Classical building. The domes and decorative scheme are an unusual and whimsical addition to an otherwise utilitarian building that was originally designed as a public convenience for tram staff and passengers.
- The building is a Wellington landmark, in part for its unusual design, and in part for its location in the centre of a busy transport route along Cambridge Terrace. The building makes a singular contribution to the streetscape of Cambridge Terrace and the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.
- Affectionately known as ‘the Taj’, this building is held in high public esteem. This was demonstrated by the public campaign to save the building when it was threatened with demolition in 1964, and by the various references to the building in popular culture over the years.

District Plan:	Map 16, Symbol 56
Legal Description:	Legal Road
Heritage Area:	Courtenay Place Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	Category II, reference 1434
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	The Welsh Dragon Bar and Scorpio's Restaurant The Taj Mahal, Public Convenience
Key physical dates:	1928
Architect / Builder:	Architect: Wellington City Engineers Office Builder: Fletcher Construction Ltd.
Former uses:	Public Convenience, Art Gallery, Storage and workshop for Downstage Theatre
Current uses:	Pub and restaurant

Extent: Cityview GIS 2012



WCC Cityview, 2012

1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The building was designed in 1928 by architects at the Wellington City Engineers Office as a public convenience for the employees and passengers of the tramways and also the wider Wellington community. Unlike other public conveniences built at the time, this building was constructed above ground, and was part of a series of interesting public utilities designed by the Wellington City Corporation. Due to its functional use and quirky design the building quickly became a Wellington landmark known by the nickname 'Taj Mahal'.

The toilets were also a popular beat (a sex on site venue) for men interested in men when it was open as a public toilet. When the building was undergoing renovation for The Dome Bar in the 1990s, graffiti was found under numerous layers of paint that pointed to its historical use as a beat.¹

The toilets were used for their original purpose until 1964, when they were temporarily closed due to high maintenance, running costs, increasing inaccessibility due to heavy traffic and low use by the public. The council decided it would be more economical to build new public toilets in Courtenay Place than to upgrade the existing building.² It is a testament to the high esteem that Wellingtonians had for the old building, that when the public became aware of the Council's plan to demolish the building, many wrote to the newspapers arguing against the plan.³

The building was briefly reopened, but usage of the public convenience was proven to have dropped and in 1966 the Council felt justified in closing the toilets permanently.⁴ A variety of groups applied for use of the building. Ideas included: removal and reconstruction as part of a museum complex at Paraparaumu, a craft centre, two-gauge model railway, begonia house, community centre and a training centre for the Girl Guide Movement.⁵

The successful applicant for the use of the space was Downstage Theatre Company, newly founded in 1964, which required the space for storage of theatrical props and paraphernalia. In 1971 it was leased to the Hannah Playhouse (home to Downstage Theatre) as a workshop and gallery.⁶ Downstage spent approximately \$16,500 on interior alterations, including moving interior walls to create larger spaces.⁷

The building is held in high public esteem by Wellingtonians. Stephen Oliver wrote a 'The Ballad of the Taj Mahal', a ribald ditty describing the building's changing fortunes.⁸ In 1953 the building was used by Victoria University students for a "pray-

¹ Vivienne Morrell, 'Taj Mahal Public Toilets (Former) – Cambridge Terrace and Kent Terrace, Wellington', Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga, 19 November 2012, accessed 09 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1434>

² Francis G. Stoks, *The Taj Mahal: Some Historical Notes*, (unpublished report, Oct 1978).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area spreadsheet*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).

⁷ Stoks, *The Taj Mahal: Some Historical Notes*

⁸ "Heritage Building – Cambridge/Kent Terrace – Taj Mahal". 2003. 1041-06-CAM Vol 1, Wellington City Council Records.

in” capping stunt, and similarly in 1967 the building’s roof was a surprising choice for student capping high jinks.⁹

Despite the work carried out by Downstage to make the building more suitable, the space was very hot in summer and very cold in winter. Crossing the road from the Taj Mahal to the Downstage Theatre at night was a dangerous proposition – at least one actress was stuck by a passing motorcyclist.¹⁰ A combination of these concerns persuaded the Downstage to find storage space elsewhere and the building fell into an ‘appalling state of disrepair’.¹¹

In 1978 it was given a new lease of life when it opened as a teashop and gallery. Considerable work was undertaken to convert it for hospitality use. The interior gallery was painted green and pink and works by New Zealand artists featured on the walls.

In 1980/81 a mural was painted on the ceiling of the interior. Inspiration for the design came from occupant C. Cass, who envisaged something similar to the Sistine Chapel, but based around the theme of politicians of the day. Politicians depicted include Holyoake, Seddon, Fraser, Nash, Holland, Nordmeyer, Mabel Howard, Muldoon and Lange. The mural was painted by artists David Waterman and Terry Archer.¹² The cafe operated until 1982.¹³

The building continued to be used in hospitality when, in 1997, it opened as ‘The Dome’ [a queer bar] Restaurant and Bar.¹⁴ Today the building is home to The Welsh Dragon Bar and Scorpio’s Restaurant but Wellingtonians still recall when the building was, as one commentator put it, ‘the fondest inconvenient convenience in the land’.¹⁵

⁹ “University students being removed from the Taj Mahal after capping high jinks in 1967”, Dominion Post Collection, 1967, Alexander Turnbull Library.

¹⁰ Stoks, *The Taj Mahal: Some Historical Notes*

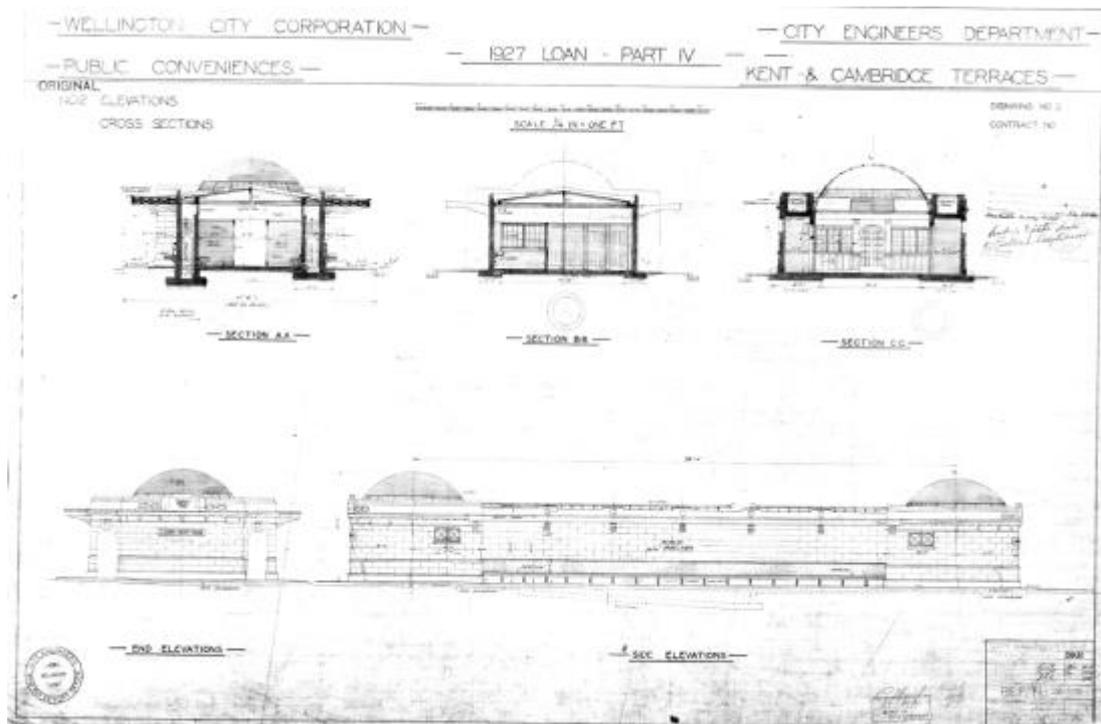
¹¹ Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area spreadsheet*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).

¹² “Heritage Building – Cambridge/Kent Terrace – Taj Mahal”. 2003. 1041-06-CAM Vol 1, Wellington City Council Records.

¹³ Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area spreadsheet*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Stoks, *The Taj Mahal: Some Historical Notes*



Conveniences original plan, 1928. (00205:14:1343)



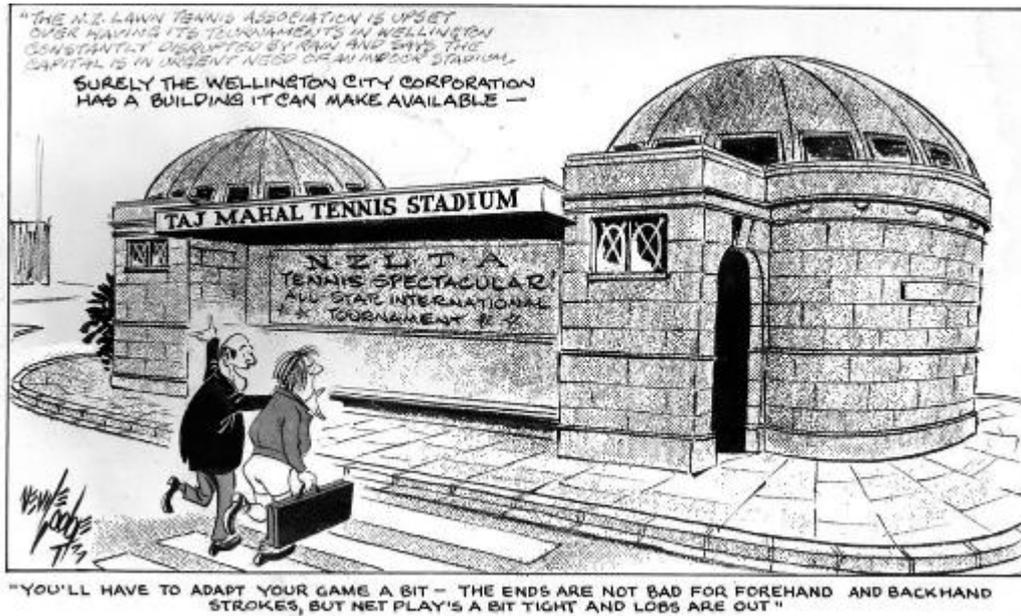
Public conveniences, 1920s.
(1/2-116556-F, photographer unidentified, Alexander Turnbull Library)



Kent Terrace and the 'Taj Mahal', 1954 (00158:1:98)



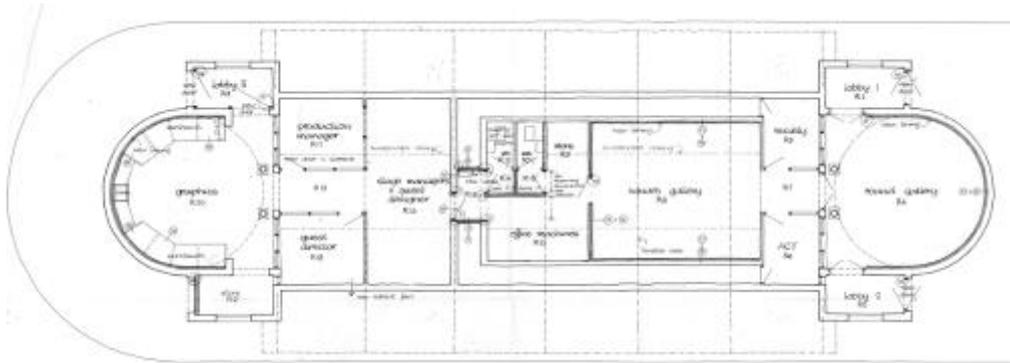
University students being removed from the Taj Mahal after capping high jinks in 1967. (Dominion Post Collection, 1967, Alexander Turnbull Library).



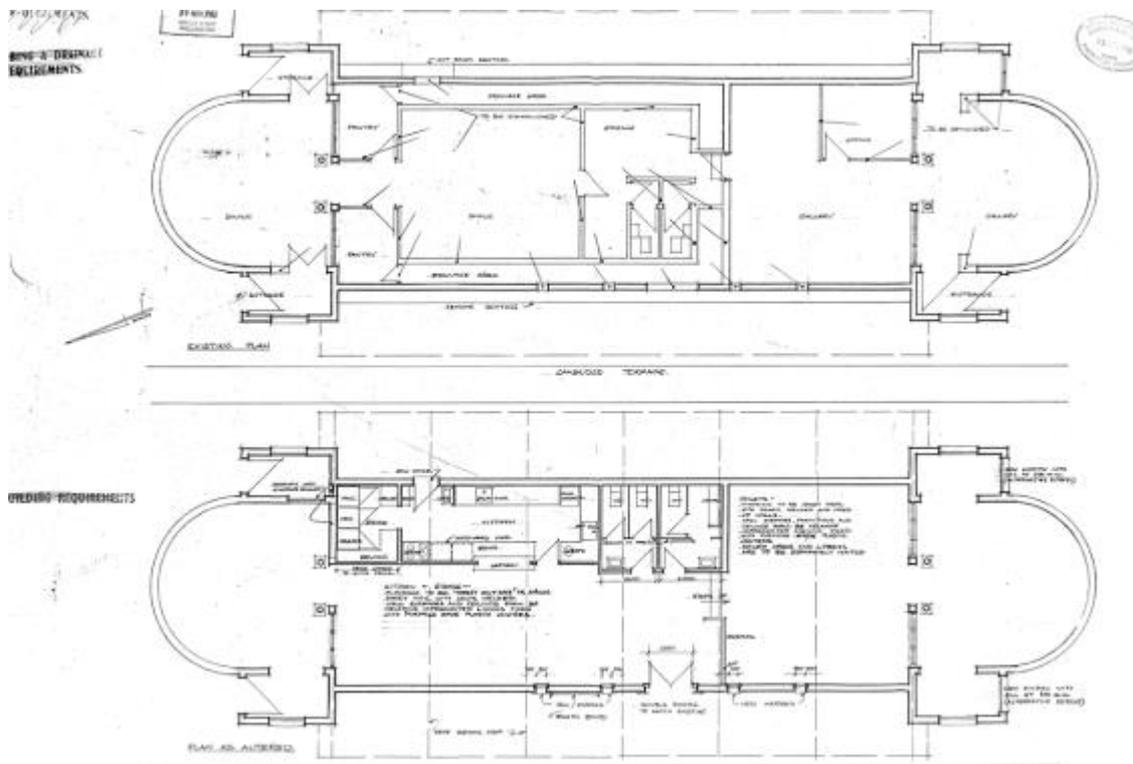
A member of the Wellington City Corporation trying to persuade a tennis player that the Taj Mahal building in Courtenay Place could make a satisfactory building for the New Zealand Lawn Tennis Association to hold its international tournaments, 1977. (A-341-048, Neville Sydney Lodge Collection, 1977, Alexander Turnbull Library)

1.2 Timeline of modifications

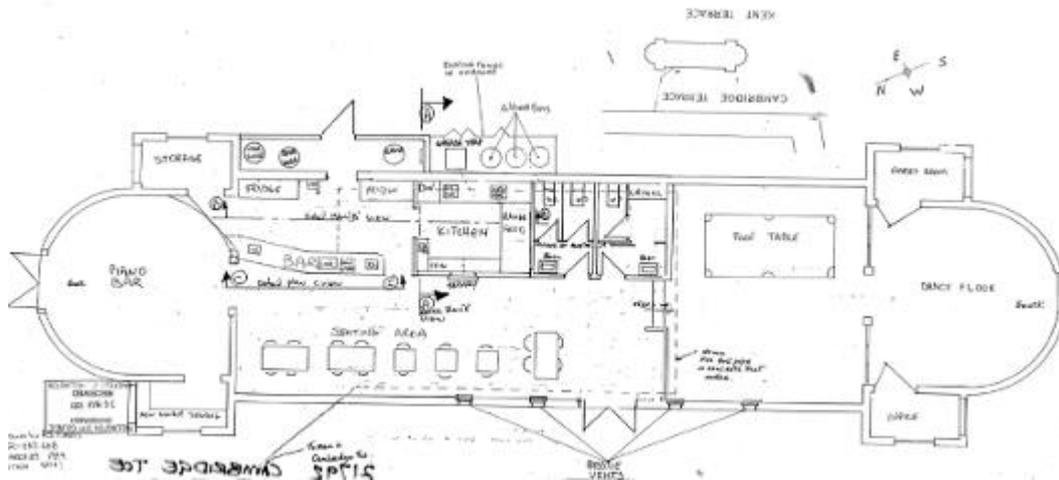
- 1928 - Building constructed. (00205:14:1343 and 00056:61:B5832)
- 1936 - Dome roof repaired.
- 1951 - Verandahs covered, work to make leaking roof weather-tight.
- 1952 - Leaking skylight repaired. (00009:1567:11/5/2)
- 1954 - Roof painted in advance of the royal visit and procession. (00009:1567:11/5/2)
- 1955 - All 32 windows in domes replaced (replaced with copper radix glazing bars and wire cast skylight glass and necessary flashings). (00009:1567:11/5/2)
- 1957 - Renewal in copper of existing glazing bars and glass and flashing same in copper, reconstruction where necessary of timber in glazing bar area. (00009:1567:11/5/2)
- 1958 - Replace malthoid portion of main roof with corrugated copper, cap flash parapets with sheet copper, recover verandahs on east/west walls with fibre glass. (00009:1567:11/5/2)
- 1973 - Downstage Theatre converted building to use it for offices, a design room and theatre exhibition area. (00058:873:C38816)
- 1982 - Alterations to building approved, carried out under building permit. (00058:0:C60876)
- 1996 - Neon sign installed. (00078:4:20313)
- 1999 - Refit of the kitchen and bar area. (00078:216:51792)



Alteration plan for Downstage, 1973. (00058:873:C38816)



Further alterations, 1982. (0058:0:C60876)



Alterations for Dome Restaurant, 1999. (0078:216:51792)

1.3 Occupation history

1928 – Wellington City Council

1971 - Leased to the Hannah Playhouse (Downstage Theatre) as a workshop.¹⁶

1978 – Tea shop and gallery.¹⁷

1982 – Taj Mahal Café and Gallery.¹⁸

1997 - ‘The Dome’ Restaurant and Bar.¹⁹

Today the building is occupied by the Scorpions Restaurant and Welsh Dragon Bar. (2012)

1.4 Architect

The building was designed by the Wellington City Engineers Office.

¹⁶ Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area spreadsheet*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ NZ Historic Places Trust Buildings Field Record Form, “Taj Mahal Restaurant”, No1434.

¹⁹ Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area spreadsheet*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

This small single storey building is distinctive for its simple Raj-influenced Stripped Classical decoration.²⁰ It has semi-circular ends, two domes – at either end – and stripped Classical design motifs which include a bracketed cornice and steeped roof parapet.²¹

When built, there was a women’s rest room under the dome at the north end with wash areas and toilets in the body of the building, while the men’s toilets, with a semi-circular row of urinals under the dome, occupied the south end. This arrangement was changed long ago and the internal arrangements greatly altered. Today the principal spaces are occupied by a bar, restaurant and kitchen, with new partitions and fittings. The northern end of the building is obscured by a fenced enclosure.

2.2 Materials

Rendered reinforced concrete. Tiled mosaic floor covering. Malthoid roof covering.

2.3 Setting

The former ‘Taj Mahal’ public convenience’s exotic appearance and general profile is strongly enhanced by its unusual location on the narrow median strip between two wide and very busy roads, Kent and Cambridge Terraces. It is a highly visible building (although somewhat less so than when it was a toilet because of a fenced enclosure and landscaping on its northern end). Furthermore, it is located right on the edge of the intersection with Courtenay Place and Majoribanks Street, where a number of significant heritage buildings are located on key corners, including the Hannah Playhouse on Cambridge Terrace, and the Clemenger BBDO Building and the Embassy Theatre, both on Kent Terrace.

Cambridge Terrace, between Wakefield Street and Courtenay Place contains an important cluster of pre-1930s buildings (excepting the Hannah Playhouse and the modern YHA Building) that add much to the historic and architectural character of the area.

²⁰ Adapted from: Michael Kelly and Russell Murray, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area Report*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).

²¹ Wellington City Council, “Taj Mahal”, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), COURT21.

Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:

Architectural: Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?

The Taj Mahal is a small, single storey building constructed as a simple Raj-influenced, stripped Classical building. The domes and decorative scheme are an unusual and whimsical addition to an otherwise utilitarian building.

Townscape: Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?

The building is a Wellington landmark, in part for the whimsy of its design, and in part for its location in the centre of a busy transport route along Cambridge Terrace.

The building makes a positive contribution to the streetscape of Cambridge and Kent Terraces and the Courtenay Place Heritage Area (which extends to include this building).

Group: Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?

The building is one of a group of public utilities designed in a quirky and unconventional style by the Wellington City engineer's department in the 1920s.

The building is also part the Courtenay Place Heritage Area, a mostly continuous heritage landscape of buildings constructed in the first half of the 20th century, although there are significant differences in form and style between some of the buildings.

Historic Value:

Association: Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?

The building is an example of the key role played by the Wellington City Council in providing important public utilities.

Association: Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?

The building has a historic association with the tram service that ran in Wellington until 1964.

Scientific Value:

Archaeological: Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?

This building is included in the NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R27/270.

Educational: Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?

Technological: *Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?*

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

Affectionately known as the Taj Mahal, this building is held in high public esteem. This was demonstrated by the public campaign to save the building when it was threatened with demolition in 1964, and by the various references to the building in popular culture (for example in cartoons, as a backdrop to student capping stunts) over the years.

Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: *Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?*

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:

Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?

Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?

The building has occupied its present site since 1928 and, being such a visible structure, it contributes strongly to the sense of place and continuity of the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

There is considerable affection for this building despite the loss of its original function. In its role as a bar/restaurant, it remains open to the public and it is still well patronised. Strong public support to keep the building in the past reveals the depth of its appeal.

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

The building is rare because it resembles no other building in Wellington, or, in all likelihood, New Zealand.

Representative: *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

Authentic: *Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?*

The building exterior is relatively unaltered and retains most of the original building fabric.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

The 'Taj Mahal' has to be one of the country's most interesting former public toilets or public utility of any kind, and is of local importance for its contribution to the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.

Sources

Kelly, Michael and Russell Murray, Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area Report*. Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006.

Morrell, Vivienne. 'Taj Mahal Public Toilets (Former) – Cambridge Terrace and Kent Terrace, Wellington'. Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga. 19 November 2012, accessed 09 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1434>

NZ Historic Places Trust Buildings Field Record Form, "Taj Mahal Restaurant", N01434.

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Wellington City Council, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 1995*. Wellington City Council, 1995.

Wellington City Council, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001.

Wellington City Council Records

"Heritage Building – Cambridge/Kent Terrace – Taj Mahal". 2003. 1041-06-CAM Vol 1, Wellington City Council Records.

Wellington City Archives

"Conveniences, Courtenay Place [Cambridge Terrace]", 1928, 00205:14:1343, Wellington City Archives.

"Cambridge Terrace, men's convenience", 20 Jan 1928, 00056:61:B5832, Wellington City Archives.

"Kent Terrace, Cambridge Terrace, alterations", 19 Sep 1973, 00058:873:C38816, Wellington City Archives.

"Cambridge Terrace, additions and alterations", 13 Dec 1982, 00058:0:C60876, Wellington City Archives.

"Cambridge Terrace, install neon sign", 05 Jul 1996, 00078:4:20313, Wellington City Archives.

"Cambridge Terrace, additions and alterations", 1999, 00078:216:51792, Wellington City Archives.

3.0 Appendix

2021 - Review against revised heritage assessment criteria

Significant heritage values – [A, B, C, E]

A: Historic values	Significant
(i) Themes	Y
(ii) Events	Y
(iii) People	Y
(iv) Social	Y
B: Physical values	Significant
(i) Archaeological	
(ii) Architectural	Y
(iii) Townscape	Y
(iv) Group	Y
(v) Surroundings	
(vi) Scientific	
(vii) Technological	
(viii) Integrity	Y
(ix) Age	
C: Social values	Significant
(i) Sentiment	
(ii) Recognition	Y
(iii) Sense of place	Y
D: Tangata whenua values	
E: Rarity	Significant
F: Representativeness	

Background research

The Legal Description is 'Legal Road'.

The building is on legal road and therefore has no title ownership document, and is owned by Council by virtue of it being on road. It is administered by WCC Property Dept.

It has been allocated a street number of 10A Cambridge Tce.

WCC Permits

00205 :14:13 43	Convenience s, Courtenay Place [Cambridge Terrace]	Known as the Taj Mahal.	Map/plan File	1928
00056 :61:B5 832	Cambridge Terrace, men's convenience	Owner and builder: Wellington City Council (WCC). Note: Popularly known as the Taj Mahal. Envelope contains application form and plans only, refer to City Engineers Department Contract 1343 for specifications and plans (Series 00205).	Building Permit/Cons ent	20 Jan 1928
00058 :873:C 38816	Kent Terrace, Cambridge Terrace, alterations	Applicant: Downstage Theatre. Builder: Lemmon & Slack Con Co Ltd. Application value: \$14,780. Note: Converting conveniences to offices and display space. Building known as the Taj Mahal.	Building Permit/Cons ent	19 Sep 1973

00058 :0:C6 0876	Cambridge Terrace, additions and alterations	Legal description: Part Section 264 Town of Wellington. Note: Building constructed as conveniences, known as the Taj Mahal.	Building Permit/Consent Microfiche	13 Dec 1982
00078 :4:203 13	Cambridge Terrace, install neon sign	Applicant: Karen Krough. Legal description: Part Section 264 Town of Wellington. Application value: \$900. Note: Building constructed as conveniences, known as the Taj Mahal.	Building Permit/Consent	05 Jul 1996
00078 :216:5 1792	Cambridge Terrace, additions and alterations	Work Description: Refit of kitchen and bar area. Owner: Wellington City Council. Applicant: The Dome. Application value: \$2,500. Notes: Known as the Taj Mahal.	Building Permit/Consent	1999

A CITY CONVENIENCE

AT COURTENAY PLACE

PROMISING PLANS

The first of the city conveniences to be built from the loan of £20,000, authorised recently, is to be commenced shortly at Courtenay place by contract. Tenders have now been called for.

The building will stand in what is known as Clyde quay square in a line with the reserve between Kent and Cambridge terraces, i.e., just about where the taxi stand is at present. The width over all will be about that of the reserve plots, and the building, 97 feet in length, will be set sufficiently far north to give clear visibility as from the north side of Courtenay place to traffic from Oriental Bay and Majoribanks street. The main features will be domed circular compartments at either end, joined by a fairly low middle portion, 50 odd feet long, with a wide verandah sheltering a line of seating on either side. The lighting will be obtained mostly from above, the few window openings shown on the plan being more for appearance than as necessities. A special system of ventilation is provided, the air passages being largely open to the sky, though sufficiently protected. The northern domed compartment is shown as a rest room for women and children, that aspect being chosen in preference to the southern end, for the sake of the sun and as more private. The rest room will be quite apart from the lavatory and conveniences sections. Two caretakers will be employed. When the Market square rest room was proposed a fine crop of objections sprang up; it was maintained that there would be a serious lack of privacy, that the rest room would not be availed of, and so on and so on, but those objections have been proved, as far as most sensible people are concerned, to have been groundless.

COURTENAY PLACE LAY-OUT.

Several difficulties had to be overcome in the preparation of the plans, and certain features may therefore come in for criticism. In the first place many people may argue that the building should go in Courtenay place proper, and not in Clyde quay, where it can be reached by tramway passengers only by crossing two lines of traffic. That argument is generally sound, but on the other hand there is not much ground on the site of the present tramway waiting shed for an adequate waiting room and conveniences, at any rate without disturbing the pohutukawas, and assuredly if that were even hinted at the council would be decried as vandals of the most reckless and destructive variety. Possibly had the convenience question been considered in relation to the many-times attempted planning of the re-lay-out of Courtenay place a satisfactory compromise could have been made, but the replanning of the tramway waiting shed and tracks is still on paper, in half a dozen forms, no one of them finally approved. It is considered probable that the present arrangement of tram tracks past the waiting shed will be radically altered, but it cannot be that the outward and inward tracks will be separated and the new waiting shed—wherever that may be—placed in between them, for from such a central platform it would not be possible to board either line of cars, as Wellington trams are open on one side only, and that side would be away from the centre platform. That suggests that two boarding platforms may be put down some day, with both lines of car tracks running between them, and in that case there would not be much room for rest room and convenience facilities.

The whole of the building will be above ground, for the lines of underground services in the square are very shallow, and special pumping provision would have been required otherwise. The disappearance of objections as to lack of privacy in the case of the Manners street rest room, however, is probably a fair answer to objections which may be raised against the building as planned. Steps are an objection in the case of a rest room, for persons run more smoothly on the level.

To some extent the seating provision, on the east side at any rate, can serve as tramway waiting space, for Oriental Bay and No. 10 cars will run past, about 15 feet separating the tracks and the building, but on the other side the seating will be just plain seating, of which Wellington has none too much.