

**DISTRICT PLAN – LISTED HERITAGE PLACE
HERITAGE ASSESSMENT – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
HERITAGE ITEM NUMBER 372
*FORMER MED CONVERTER STATION AND SUBSTATION
BUILDING AND SETTING - 218R MANCHESTER STREET***



PHOTOGRAPH : 9/12/2014, M.VAIR-PIOVA

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Historical and social values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular person, group, organisation, institution, event, phase or activity; the continuity and/or change of a phase or activity; social, historical, traditional, economic, political or other patterns.

The former MED converter station and substation building are of historical and social significance for their association with the city's electricity supply and the company that provided this essential service. An electricity service was first established in Christchurch in 1903, and a substation was housed on site from 1914. The converter station and substation building was extended in 1928. However, concerns about the resistance of its brick structure to earthquakes following events at Napier prompted its rebuilding in reinforced concrete between May 1932 and February 1933.

This block of the city was divided into town sections and was originally in the ownership of a number of different owners. Over time the Council purchased these sections and by 1934 it owned almost half of the block (Certificate of Title 439/091). In 1934 the site, in addition to the new converter station and substation building, housed the tepid baths, a Council garage, stables, workshops, Lines Department, Works office, stores, electrical showroom and the destructor (Council of Fire & Accident Underwriters Associations of NZ).

After the destructor was demolished in 1939, the converter station and substation building was extended eastwards in the same style. This extension approximately doubled the length of its Armagh Street façade. The MED also established new offices on the corner of Manchester and Armagh Streets in 1939, replacing an earlier building which was erected in 1918. By 1966 the site was occupied by the MED showroom and offices, CCC traffic department, a public carpark, MED autoworks, lines department, wiring department, substation and store. In 1966 the converter station and substation building is recorded as housing a store at the eastern end, with a blacksmith in the south lean to, and the MED substation to the west (Council of Fire & Accident Underwriters Associations of NZ).

The buildings and site were later occupied by Southpower, and more recently Orion, reflecting changes in the electricity supply system throughout New Zealand. Southpower was created in 1989 and served to merge MED and the Central Canterbury Electric Power Board. The former MED converter station and substation building continued to be occupied by Orion technical and administrative staff and equipment after the 2010-11 earthquakes but in 2013 was acquired by the Crown along with a number of other neighbouring buildings owned by Orion as part of the Eastern Frame.

Utility buildings such as the former MED converter station and substation building in the city's streetscape reflect the public commitment to introduce improved drainage and power to the City. The Christchurch City Council had agreed in 1898 to establish a supply of electric power for public and private use and for street lighting. Limited supplies of electricity became available in Christchurch in 1903, after the city's rubbish destructor was commissioned in 1902 and then from the Tramway Board's power station at Falsgrave Street, which was commissioned in 1905. These small-scale beginnings eventually led to the Council's decision to generate electricity from Lake Coleridge - a progressive and innovative scheme which was taken over by the Government in 1910 and became the first major hydro-electric power scheme in New Zealand when it opened in 1914. Christchurch became the first New Zealand city to benefit from construction of a major State hydro-electricity station, with power from the Lake Coleridge station reaching Christchurch in 1915.

Distribution to Christchurch consumers was managed via a network of substations throughout the city and suburbs connected by underground cables and power reticulation proceeded rapidly. Households connected to electricity and the sewage system were ushered into a new era of domestic comfort and efficiency - electricity was cheaper and cleaner than coal or gas and the benefits of electric household appliances were widely promoted. The retail distribution and sale of electricity became the responsibility of the Municipal Electricity Department of the City Council. MED employees enjoyed job security, good work conditions and payrates, paid holidays and an active staff social life in the 1920s in particular.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Cultural and spiritual values that demonstrate or are associated with the distinctive characteristics of a way of life, philosophy, tradition, religion, or other belief, including: the symbolic or commemorative value of the place; significance to Tangata Whenua; and/or associations with an identifiable group and esteemed by this group for its cultural values.

The former MED converter station and substation building has cultural significance as a site connected to the changes that electrical supply brought to New Zealand society and culture, particularly enabling new ways of lighting evening entertainment and sporting events, and providing power for new ranges of industrial machinery and domestic appliances.

ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

Architectural and aesthetic values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular style, period or designer, design values, form, scale, colour, texture and material of the place.

The former MED converter station and substation building is of architectural and aesthetic significance because it is resonant of the approach, applied prior to c.1950, of beautifying the exterior of utility buildings with subdued designs, typically either Classical, Arts and Crafts, or Art Deco / Moderne in style. The former MED converter station and substation building itself merges design in a moderne style, reflected in strongly emphasized horizontal coursing and

diagonal and triangular glazing to the windows, with the more Classical form of its proportioned symmetrical façade, and pared down decoration derived from Classical sources.

The building has been built in at least two stages. It replaced earlier Victorian and Edwardian buildings that housed the Christchurch City Council rubbish destructor which was located at the eastern end adjacent to the current substation. The interior ground floors are on three levels that confirm its sequential construction. Construction is of structural steel post and beam wall and roof framing with concrete slab floors. Walls to the side and rear are painted brick masonry and utilitarian in nature. The Armagh street façade is of plastered masonry that continues the horizontal detailing that had been seen in the 1939 office building. The interiors are industrial in nature with significant elements being the gantry cranes. The interior spaces are typical of industrial construction of the time and have been adapted to suit modern office and production use. The building has strongly emphasized horizontal coursing and diagonal and triangular glazing to the windows.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP SIGNIFICANCE

Technological and craftsmanship values that demonstrate or are associated with: the nature and use of materials, finishes and/or technological or constructional methods which were innovative, or of notable quality for the period.

The former MED converter station and substation building is of technological and craftsmanship significance for its construction and modern styling, which reflect the techniques and methods for the period. It is of reinforced concrete construction, with steel framed casement windows. It represents an example from the period of a building designed in order to mitigate seismic concerns, with the steel frame construction of the building having been designed to resist earthquake stresses, and to accommodate heavy machinery and vibrations.

CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

Contextual values that demonstrate or are associated with: a relationship to the environment (constructed and natural), a landscape, setting, group, precinct or streetscape; a degree of consistency in terms of type, scale, form, materials, texture, colour, style and/or detail; recognised landmarks and landscape which are recognised and contribute to the unique identity of the environment.

The former MED converter station and substation building and setting have contextual significance because of its setting in an area of the site which was historically used by the Council as a general yard and for electrical reticulation activities. The building also has a strong presence in the streetscape due to its location and form.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE

Archaeological or scientific values that demonstrate or are associated with: the potential to provide information through physical or scientific evidence an understanding about social historical, cultural, spiritual, technological or other values of past events, activities, structures or people.

The former MED converter station and substation building and setting are of archaeological significance for their potential to provide archaeological evidence of human activity, including that which pre dates 1900, including Maori, considering its close proximity to Ōtākaro/Avon River and European activity - in particular activity related to electrical reticulation. The Fooks

map (1862) and Strouts map (1877) evidence that buildings occupied parts of the site prior to 1900. The site served as a City Council yards, which housed the City destructor – a device for burning the City’s rubbish, installed on the site in 1902, and the Christchurch Municipal Tepid Baths (c1908).

ASSESSMENT STATEMENT

The former MED converter and substation building is of overall heritage significance to Christchurch and Banks Peninsula. It has historical and social significance because of its association with the city’s electricity supply and the Municipal Electricity Department that provided this essential service to the City. It is of cultural significance for its association with the changes in lifestyle that a reliable electricity supply brought to Christchurch citizens and businesses. The building is of architectural and aesthetic significance because it serves as an example of the contemporary subdued decoration applied to utilitarian building, and for its merging of its design in the moderne style, which was not a common style for buildings in the City, and few of which remain today, while incorporating Classical form. It is of technological and craftsmanship significance for its construction, materials and detailing, while it is of contextual significance for its setting within an area of historical MED activity. The building and setting are of archaeological significance for their potential to provide evidence of human activity, including that which pre-dates 1900, and in particular activity related to electrical reticulation.

REFERENCES:

The Press 5.5.1939

Christchurch City Council Heritage file, 218 Manchester Street

Mark Alexander, *Christchurch: a city of light*, Christchurch: Southpower, 1990

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PLEASE NOTE THIS ASSESSMENT IS BASED ON INFORMATION AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING. DUE TO THE ONGOING NATURE OF HERITAGE RESEARCH, FUTURE REASSESSMENT OF THIS HERITAGE ITEM MAY BE NECESSARY TO REFLECT ANY CHANGES IN KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ITS HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE.

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