



**DISTRICT PLAN – LISTED HERITAGE PLACE  
HERITAGE ASSESSMENT – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE  
HERITAGE ITEM NUMBER 601  
*FORMER MED SUBSTATION AND SETTING – 259 MILTON  
STREET, CHRISTCHURCH***



**PHOTOGRAPH: M.VAIR-PIOVA, 19/12/2014**

**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 district substation (1928) is of historical and social significance as one of many utility buildings (substations and pumphouses) erected among the suburban homes they historically serviced, and in some cases, still service. The continuity of utility buildings such as the Milton Street substation in the city's streetscape marks the introduction of 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 central government in 1910 and became the first major hydro-electric power scheme in New Zealand when it opened in 1914.

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 (MED) of the City Council, which had a visible presence throughout the city in the form of its many ornamental substation buildings built from the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the late 1940s.

The Milton Street substation was built as a large district substation in response to a reorganisation of electricity distribution in the city in the mid-1920s. Its size contributed to a dispute with the owner of a neighbouring dwelling, Thomas Gordon, which held up construction for several months. Eventually the MED decided to pay for the relocation of Gordon's water and sewer connections, which ran under the substation site, in addition to paying Gordon £50 compensation. Before its purchase by the City Council in 1927, the 20 perches section which the substation was built on had been the site of a four-roomed cottage, which during the 1900s and 1910s had been home to the family of clicker Frederick Disher.

Christchurch's substations were maintained by Southpower when it split from the Christchurch City Council in 1989 and passed to Orion Ltd. when the retail and supply aspects of the business separated in 1999. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new smaller substation was built in Milton Street, making the 1928 Milton Street substation building redundant for its original use. The Milton Street substation is now occupied by a joinery business.

## **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 substation has cultural significance because of its association with the introduction of reticulated electricity to the city, which changed subscribers' way of life by providing a clean and efficient energy source with which to power their household and commercial activities. Despite the benefits, the proliferation of utility buildings in the city often attracted criticism and opposition because of their impact on the suburban streetscape.

## **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 substation is of architectural and aesthetic significance as a representative example of the ornamental, classically influenced substations built in Christchurch during the 1920s and 1930s. It was designed by the MED draughtsman RM Jenkin. The designers of

substations had to consider competing demands of economics, technical requirements and public opinion within a context of changing architectural fashions. Typically windowless, those built in the 1920s exhibited a greater degree of decoration, as in the 1930s this was pared back in response to the need for earthquake resistance. Ornamentation was done away with altogether in the late 1940s, when substations began to be enclosed within prosaic green metal boxes.

The Milton Street substation was much larger than many others in the city because it needed to accommodate a travelling crane (an overhead crane on rails) for lifting heavy equipment such as transformers. The building is two storeys in height, has a rectangular footprint and a gabled roof concealed by a tall parapet. Classical motifs on the plastered façade include a flattened pediment, deep projecting cornice and bulky corner pilasters. The torchere motifs, which frame a wide, steel framed window at the first floor level, are unique to this substation. A broad lintel separates the window from the central entrance doors below. The original ground floor door has been replaced with timber bi-fold openings. Following the 2010/2011 Christchurch earthquakes, work was carried out on the substation to secure the parapet and demolish a rear brick extension.

## **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 substation is of technological and craftsmanship significance for its robust reinforced concrete with brick construction. White compo, a mixture of white Dunedin sand and white cement, was used to emphasize the decorative and structural features of the façade: lintel, torcheres, dentils, circular ornaments, cornices and mouldings, door and window openings, parapet and concrete piers. The distinctive torch ornaments were built out roughly from the wall in brickwork.

## **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 Milton Street district substation and its setting has contextual significance for its contribution to the streetscape of Milton Street, on account of its scale and location on the street frontage. Because of its siting, size and classical façade the building serves as a landmark. It also shares its history of providing municipal services with the newer substation to its east, and the City Care Depot to its immediate west. The setting of the building consists of a long narrow rectangular parcel of land including the building and a service yard area behind.

## **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 Milton Street district substation and its setting have archaeological significance because of the potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to past building construction methods and materials, electrical reticulation technology and other human activity, including that which occurred prior to 1900. There was a four-room cottage on the site before the substation was erected.

## **ASSESSMENT STATEMENT**

The former Milton Street district substation and its setting has overall heritage significance to Christchurch, including Banks Peninsula. The building has historical and social significance as one of a network of substations built by the Municipal Electricity Department in Christchurch from the 1910s to early 1940s. These early substations, collectively and individually, mark the establishment of reticulated power to the Christchurch - the first city in New Zealand city to benefit from construction of a major state hydro-electricity station. The former substation has cultural significance because of its association with the introduction of reticulated electricity, which changed people's way of life by providing a clean and efficient energy source to power their household and commercial activities. The former substation has architectural and aesthetic significance as the largest of the ornamental, classically influenced substations built in Christchurch during this period. The former substation has technological and craftsmanship significance because of its construction and architectural detailing. It has contextual significance because its size and position make it a landmark on Milton Street, and because it sits in a group of buildings which continue the tradition of municipal services. It has archaeological significance because its setting, on which a pre-1900 dwelling was built, has the potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to past building construction methods and materials, and human activity on the site.

## **REFERENCES:**

Christchurch City Council Heritage files *263 Milton Street, Substation*

AP Wood 'Temples to the Lighting' *Avenues* November 2005

Christchurch City Council *The Architectural Heritage of Christchurch: 10. Pavilions, temples & four square walls - Christchurch pump houses and substations* (Christchurch, 2003)

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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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