

## Durie Hill Elevator Shaft/Tunnel



**Location:** Blyth Street, Anzac Parade

**Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga**

**List Number:** 164

**Physical Description:** The elevator structure comprises a reinforced concrete tower on Durie Hill with a tunnel and entry from Anzac Parade. The entry portal, with the letters '1916' above the opening, and tunnel at the base of the hill are of reinforced concrete, which leads to the shaft and timber framed and panelled

**Register Item Number:**

59

**Building Type:**

- Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Recreation
- Institutional
- Agriculture
- Other

**Significance:**

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Cultural

**Thematic Context**

- Early Settlement
- Residential
- Industry
- Agricultural
- Commerce
- Transport
- Civic/Admin
- Health
- Education
- Religion
- Recreation
- Community
- Memorials
- Military

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elevator car. Metal sliding gates close the shaft when the car is in transit. The upper part of the complex in Blyth Street has a two storey tower with viewing platform on the roof and a cast iron spiral stair for access. The tower has a slight mediaeval air, perhaps imitating the keep of a castle, with the upper storey projecting beyond the base supported on triangular corbels and the perimeter of the roof having a heavy moulded cornice. The entry to the lift is an extension on the south of the tower and has a simple opening without a door. The lean-to roof is hidden by a shallow angled pedimented parapet. A machine room extends the east from the tower.

**Other known names:**

**Current Use:** Lift

**Former Uses:**

**Heritage Status:** Heritage NZPT List **District Plan Class:** Class A

(Cat. 1)

**Architectural Style:** Simplified Castle **Date of Construction:** 1919

style

**Materials:** reinforced concrete, cast iron stair way, timber panelled lift car, steel sliding gate, machinery

**Registered owner:**

**Legal Description:**

**History:** The Durie Hill Elevator, built to provide transport to and from Durie Hill in Wanganui, is a rare and innovative example of public transport. In 1910 Durie Hill became part of the Wanganui Borough, and the Council faced the problem of providing public transport to the settlement on the hill. A cable car system was initially proposed but found to be too expensive, and eventually an alternative solution, an elevator up through the hill, was agreed upon.

The complex, including elevator and tunnel, was originally designed by Messrs J. Ball and E. Crow and intended to be a public enterprise. However, Wanganui ratepayers were not prepared to take the bear the financial risk of the project, and a private company, the Durie Town Elevator Co., was formed to take over the scheme. The principals of this firm were Col. A. E. Wilson and W. J. Polson. Construction of the elevator began in 1916 by contractors Maxwell and Mann. This included the excavation of a tunnel (205m long, 3m high and 2.7m wide), and an elevator shaft (66m high), ending in a 9.7m flat-topped tower. The tunnel and shaft were lined with reinforced concrete. It was opened on 2 August 1919 by Mrs W. Polson. The maximum fares had been set by the Council at adults 4d

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up and 2d down, and children 3d up and 1d down. The original fare for twelve trips (six up and six down) was one shilling. Initially the elevator was powered by the tramway electricity supply of 500 volts D.C. When the tramway system was removed from the city, a rectifier was acquired to convert the A.C. current from the national electricity grid to the required 500 D.C.

The construction of the elevator enabled the development of the Durie Hill Garden Suburb in 1920. This suburb was planned by the architect Samuel Hurst Seager, and is considered to be the first modern New Zealand suburb. The elevator continued to be operated by the company until 1 June 1942 when control passed to the Wanganui City Council, which continues to operate the complex today.

The Durie Hill Elevator Shaft and Tunnel was a unique solution to the problems of providing public transport in the days before the motor vehicle was commonplace. Its installation enabled the establishment of a new suburb. Today the elevator remains a popular form of transport both for the residents of Durie Hill and for tourists wishing to enjoy the views of the city of Wanganui, the Whanganui River, and beyond.

**Architect/Designer:** J Ball and E Crow

**History of changes:**

**Date Period:** The structures were constructed in 1919

**Rarity / Special Features:** The Durie Hill Elevator is rare if not unique in New Zealand as a solution to provide (vertical) public transportation to a newly developed suburb.

**Integrity:** The condition of the structure and mechanism is beyond the scope and expertise of this study

**Representativeness:** The lift was an innovative solution to providing public transportation to the new Durie Hill suburb. An alternative proposed was a cable car system, as used in Kelburn in Wellington, however the lift proposal was selected and has continued in use since 1919.

**Context/Group Value:** The lift and tunnel structures are associated with the Durie Hill suburb, New Zealand's first planned garden suburb as well as the Durie Hill Memorial nearby.

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**Diversity (Form and Features):** The design of the tunnel was a common solution for the period, however, the castellated styled for the lift and motor room are unusual.

**Fragility / Vulnerability:** As early reinforced concrete structures, the tunnel and lift structure are vulnerable to earthquake damage.

## Summary of Significance:

### *Archaeological Qualities*

Not known.

### *Architectural Qualities*

While the tunnel design for Durie Hill was typical for the period, the design of the lift building and motor room was given some architectural expression in the form of a simplified castellated style, which evokes a sense of solidity and protection for passengers. The design problem was unusual in having a lift mechanism and structure external to a building. The solution was interesting if not a little playful.

The designer of the structures was J Ball and E Crow.

### *Historic Qualities*

The structures are associated with the development of the Durie Hill garden suburb designed by Christchurch architect Samuel Hurst Seager and provided a solution to public access to the suburb without public vehicular transportation being available. The building also allowed tourists to gain a view of the town from the top of the tower.

The reluctance of the Council to take on the financial risks involved, a not uncommon pattern in local government, saw a private company successfully take on the project. The Council took over control of the facility in 1942, and the operation of the lift is tendered.

### *Scientific Qualities*

The structures have scientific interest in engineering solutions to digging the tunnel and lift shaft.

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## **Technical Qualities**

The technical engineering knowledge required for the construction of the tunnel and lift shaft would have been not inconsiderable and its continued use over 90 years later gives testimony to the engineers and workmen who constructed it.

## **Cultural Qualities**

The place has some sentimental values as a tourist attraction and as transport used by regular commuters while also being a physical landmark overlooking the city.

## **Reference Source:**

## **Associated Pictures:**

*Date of Survey: 2012*

*Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr*