

MISSING THE MARK: THE CHOICE OF LOCATIONS FOR SCULPTURES HONOURING WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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This year, 2018, marks the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand.

To commemorate this world-first phenomenon in 1893 Auckland Council, through its Public Arts Team, has invited expressions of interest 'from emerging artists who wish to be considered for the commission of temporary artworks to mark the he focus is on temporary/semi-permanent (5 year lifespan) public art opportunities, enabling artworks that will thematically respond to the anniversary.' (<https://www.facebook.com/PublicArtAKL/posts/1738129419559368>)

Three sites identified in Tāmaki Makaurau to be the locations for new temporary public artworks are:

- Tin Tacks Reserve Onehunga
- Crawford Reserve Howick
- Killarney Park Takapuna (TBC)

While Council is honouring this significant event, we are bemused by their omission of Devonport as a site for a commemorative sculpture since Devonport has been recorded as the first place women voted in Aotearoa, and from 2013 local women have been advocating for a sculpture here.

Part of the impetus for this call was the connection to Devonport of suffragette Kate Sheppard through local resident Betty Cuthbert, her grand-niece. The intention was to have Betty, herself a committed social activist, unveil the sculpture. However, Betty died, aged 95 years, in March 2017. Her daughter Barbara Cuthbert, also a Devonport local, continues this family tradition.

Kate Sheppard (1847-1934) the most prominent leader of the suffrage campaign.





Betty Cuthbert on Windsor Reserve, the site of the proposed suffrage sculpture.

Below is the proposal Ruth Coombes and Depot Artspace presented to the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board in 2014. It was unanimously supported by the Board, and many meetings with the Public Art Department took place which resulted in protracted and painful suffocation by red tape. Attempts to resurrect the submission suffered a similar fate.

PROPOSAL TO DEVONPORT-TAKAPUNA LOCAL BOARD: A SUFFRAGE SCULPTURE FOR DEVONPORT IN COMMEMORATION OF THE FIRST VOTE CAST BY WOMEN.

In July, 2013, long time Devonport resident and peace activist, Ruth Coombes approached the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board about the commissioning of a sculpture to commemorate women's suffrage and the granting of the vote to women in New Zealand in 1893. Ruth's initial submission asserted that it "would be a fitting tribute to those women who worked tirelessly against vociferous opposition, to gain the franchise for all women, an extraordinary achievement that is worth celebrating with a substantial public artwork. Placed in the heart of Devonport it would create a suitable focus for keeping this important event firmly in our consciousness."

The suggested site for the sculpture was in the vicinity of the Devonport Library, the site where women voted for the first time. It seems that the first woman to cast her vote in the November 1893 election did so at the Devonport Borough Council, which stood where the new library will be built. ('Beginnings 2.' Paul Titchener, etching below from the London Graphic 1894)

As the library was about to be demolished and replaced it seemed a fitting time to provide a more appropriate and visible acknowledgement of this momentous event through the installation of a Suffrage sculpture. The previous plaque affixed to the library was small, unnoticeable and largely obscured by foliage.

The submission is supported by the National Council of Women (NCW); Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF); Devonport Heritage; Depot Artspace. It was also noted that Kate Sheppard was the first president of NCW and her grandniece, Betty Cuthbert, an activist in her own right, is a long-term Devonport resident.

The Board was amenable to Ruth's proposal and a meeting was organised involving the following representatives:

Sarah Livingstone,	The Building Intelligence Group (TBIG)
Jon Rennie	Athfield Architects Ltd (AAL)
Matthew Woodside	Parks Advisor, Devonport and Takapuna
Ruth Coombes	Project initiator
Linda Blincko	Depot Artspace
Robyn Gibson	Artist, curator, Depot Artspace

Potential location for Suffrage Sculpture

Project landscape architects, Wraight and Associates looked at the site and its surrounds, and considered the 'reading courtyard' as the location for the suffrage plaque and garden. It would not, however, accommodate a memorial sculpture, being a small space, inaccessible to the public and not related to the original Council Chambers entrance where the suffragettes cast their votes.

An appropriate site for the Suffrage Memorial Sculpture, both prominent and historically significant, was agreed on by meeting attendees as the Windsor Reserve, in the corner diagonal to the former library and old Borough Council Chambers where the first vote by women was cast. This corner of the reserve was also once a rose garden, with a rose planted by veteran feminist and peace campaigner Sonja Davies.



In New Zealand Women's Suffrage has made greater headway than at home. Not only has one of the fair sex been elected Mayor of Christchurch, but all obtained their new right at the recent general elections. At Devonport, near Auckland, at 10 a.m. on the polling day, before the Borough Council Chambers, were a few groups of women, whose faces, except the one who was "so flustered I put the mark against the wrong name," exhibited unmistakable signs of triumph and the bestial satisfaction. At her side they were in possession of the whole field, their husbands and brothers being at work.—Our illustration is from a sketch by Donald T. Hodgie, Sen. Surgeon R.N., H.M.S. "Cerberus"

WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE IN NEW ZEALAND: LADY VOTERS GOING TO THE POLL AT DEVONPORT, NEAR AUCKLAND

The Suffrage Sculpture

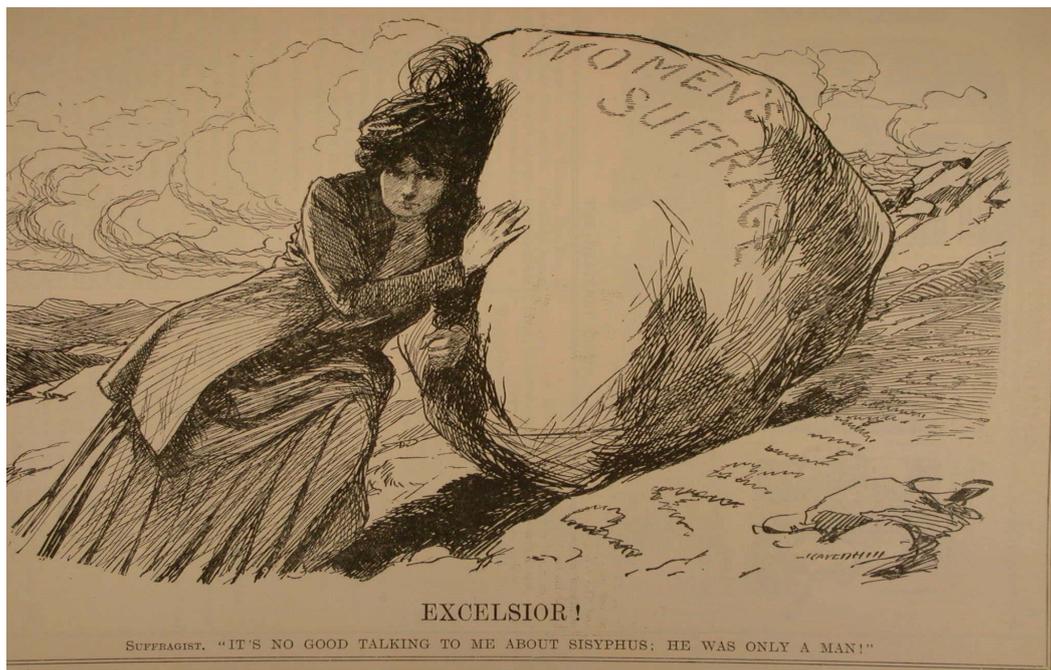
The Suffrage sculpture should be visually and conceptually accessible given that it will serve to commemorate and educate the public about a significant event in New Zealand's history. The sculpture is therefore likely to be representational, as opposed to abstract in form, also in keeping with the era and event being celebrated. Within these parameters there is wide scope to develop something unique, distinctive and relevant to its local community and site, rather than simply a Kate Sheppard replica.

The sculpture would also be a meaningful addition to an area with a woeful dearth of public art. It would enhance and add interest to a community which is known for its heritage and creativity. It also contributes to the Auckland Plan strategic directive to integrate art into our everyday lives (see Section 1.2).

Commissioning a Sculpture

In Auckland Council's draft Public Art policy it is stated that Local boards have a key role in establishing Auckland's place-making priorities. 'Most public artworks are local by nature. Auckland's 21 local boards are uniquely placed to know and understand the aspirations, diversity, character and needs of their local communities and the distinctive places of their board area.' (4.1.2)

It is envisaged that a piece of public art commemorating a significant event in Devonport would be appropriately undertaken by a local artist. There are a number of well-known and highly regarded artists in Devonport who would have the vision, capability and reliability to undertake a project of this nature; for example, Helen Pollock, Jessica Pearless, Robyn Gibson.



Summary

A Suffrage memorial sculpture celebrating women achieving suffrage in 1893 will be a significant and meaningful addition to Devonport's public art and fulfils Auckland Council's draft Public Arts Policy vision of public art as being "a highly visible and tangible expression of the ideas, values, stories and histories of people and place" and giving importance to public art "that is unique, relevant and memorable."

"Public art marks significant sites and honours our treasured memories."
(Draft Arts Policy 2013. 3.1)