

**I**N THE debacle over building New Plymouth's shining new council headquarters, many outlandish claims were made.

But one claim in the 1987 controversy was true: "We're conducting city business from a tram generating shed," the banner headline in the advertisement read.

Since 1916 New Plymouth's various governing councils have operated from New Plymouth's Electricity Department building — a building originally planned to house large electrical machinery to run the town's now long-forgotten trams.

Trams vanished from New Plymouth streets in 1954, — now the same fate awaits the building on the corner of Liardet St and Leach St.

And barely a murmur of protest about the demolition of the grand old building — due to begin today — has been heard.

Taranaki Museum director Ron Lambert earlier this month described its planned destruction as an "unfortunate loss."

While recognised by the council as a building "of note," it was not regarded as nationally important.

"It should have been determined 10 years ago that it was going to stay there and the (new council buildings) development planned around it," he said.

In fact, the pigeons that call the building their home evoked more sympathy.

Worried that the feathered dwellers would fret over the loss of a roost, concerned citizen Errol Herbert declared to The Daily News: "They've been living there for 75-odd years and little thought has been given by council to their future."

That 1987 advertisement aimed at convincing electors to vote for the city council to raise a \$4.8 million loan for a new home clearly spelt out the council's view of the building.

"It was built to house electricity generating equipment for trams! The building does not comply with the city's earthquake by-laws. It is too small to cater for the demands of today's population," the ad read.

The plan was defeated at a loan poll, but the council went ahead anyway and instead of raising a loan is funding the new buildings from revenue.

So while the advertisement failed to convince the public, it at least had its facts straight.

**T**O UNDERSTAND the building's history, we have to look at the Municipal Electrical Department's history.

By 1915 the electricity department was rapidly expanding, and its sub-station — a shed on Lemon St — had already been extended several times.

The electricity business was switching on quickly and trams were being introduced. So the electricity department decided to build new premises on the Liardet St-Leach St intersection.

Only part of the building as it stands — or falls — today was built in 1915. In 1936 the building was "mirror-imaged" — it was extended twice as far along the Liardet St frontage and the facade done as a replica of the first half.

New Plymouth Energy manager Bruce Priest can be forgiven for



The original New Plymouth Municipal Electrical Department Building doing the job it was built to do . . . converting power to run trams. This photo pre-dates its extension in 1936.

# Farewell to a jinxed building

Demolition begins today on the Municipal Electrical Department building, and while its demise may not have provoked much outcry, GEORGINA GILES finds out the building contains a wealth of memories.

believing there is something of a jinx on the premises. The last two buildings it constructed heralded the start of a world war — and they never got to move in.

"World War I broke out as the original building was being completed. A lot of people were away at war, so the building was nearly empty.

"The city council building in King St was in very bad condition and there was no hope of doing anything about it, so the town clerk suggested they take over the electricity department's new building temporarily — and they have just moved out!"

So the electricity department never actually got to occupy its brand new premises — it carried on in the old shed next door.

When the 1936 extensions were

made, the electricity showroom was expanded and room made for some electricity offices, and the city engineer moved up a floor, taking over the top floor. This gave more space to the town clerk and treasurer.

In 1940 the electricity department built another new building — what has now been refurbished and is known as the West Block of the new city council premises.

World War II had just started — and again the electricity department's home was left largely empty, again due to lack of demand for office space during the war.

"Every time the electricity department has built a new building, war has broken out.

"We had only just moved into this new building (New Plymouth Energy

operates from the top floors of the council's new administration building) when Saddam Hussein's Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait — so we thought it was World War III," Mr Priest says.

"We hope that with the demolition of the original building, this cycle of war might end," he whimsically suggests.

With the building being reduced to rubble, New Plymouth Energy has had to find a new home for its retail venture. It has spent about \$650,000 buying a Currie St shop, and more than \$40,000 renovating it.

Back in the days when electricity was new it was considered a luxury rather than a necessity. So the borough council believed it needed a showroom to show consumers what

products were available, and to encourage more use of electricity.

Electricity then cost 8d a unit. "That equated to 40 minutes work for a unit of electricity . . . that was quite a lot of work," Mr Priest says.

In 1912 the profit on sale of goods from the electricity showroom was £75 9s 9d — with an annual income of £5417.

The council was always a traditional, conservative retailer — and it was kept this way by other city retailers.

"Every time the showroom even looked to be in danger of going into a new field other retailers queued up at the mayor's door complaining about the council competing with its own ratepayers. So there have always been constraints on what we have done."

**A** DECISION on whether the council should stay in retailing or opt out was made about three years ago.

The showroom was not doing very well — it was not entering the fierce competition by offering huge discounts — and it was losing out.

"If we started to offer the huge discounts they were offering the retailers would have queued up outside the Mayor's office saying we were trading unfairly."

The governing committee was faced with four options: to carry on as a service centre for consumers not concerned about making a profit; they could let the business slowly die; they could kill it quickly; or they could have a go at making a go. They decided to have a go.

Then a further decision had to be made because the decision had been made to demolish the building.

Again the committee decided that because the government was urging the electricity supply authority to become a commercial organisation as opposed to a service organisation, they could try the same tack and become central city retailers.

"This means a great change in attitude. If retailers line up outside the mayor's office now they will be told New Plymouth Energy is virtually a separate organisation from the council, and to go and see the manager if they are not happy."

Mr Priest says this attitude changed in April 1987 when the showroom became subject to tax like all other retailers. Before that the council did not have to pay tax, while, of course, other retailers did.

"It is always a bit of a touchy thing. We have always been treading a very thin line — the other retailers are ratepayers and they argue the council is taking business away from them."

So why did the council stay in if it was so touchy?

"Only in the last year or two we have had to ask serious questions. With the downturn in the income with retailing flattening down and with other businesses making cut-throat discounts. With business running down we had to make a decision on whether to carry on. We decided to carry on."

The theory is that when the economy recovers, New Plymouth Energy will be in the right spot to take advantage of it.