

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

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The 1960s city: heritage's problem child

When thinking of heritage and the city, most people dismiss 1960s architecture as unworthy, non-urban, and often, as just plain ugly. Yet this distaste for the 1960s is ironic given the surge in popularity of mid-century design, especially modernist houses, furniture and the glamorous interiors popularised by the TV series *Mad Men*. City buildings of the 1960s are easy targets for superficial visual critique, unsympathetic redevelopment or, more commonly, expedient demolition.

The culprit in the essentially dark history of the 1960s city has been the high-rise building. Taking Melbourne as an example, it was in 1955 that concessions granted to the Uniform Building Regulations allowed buildings to exceed 40 metres (132 feet), the old height limit instituted in 1916, so long as there was provision of public space at ground level. ICI House (1955-8) broke the 40m height limit and in doing so set the pattern for the dramatic transformation of Melbourne's urban morphology. Its fine urban grain and vibrant street life was dramatically eroded by the tower-plaza model and by the creation of large-scale developments that frequently occupied entire city blocks.

However, by 1976, with the formation of the Collins Street Defence Movement, there came a *volte-face* to the destruction of Melbourne's 19th century heritage. With the completion of the contextually respectful No.1 Collins Street in 1980, it appeared that Melbourne might have not lost its 19th century soul and learned to manage new development with an understanding that the street also mattered. By the late 1980s, the National Trust and Heritage Victoria had also come to recognise skyscrapers like ICI House, BHP House and Eagle House as exemplars of aesthetic and technical excellence.

Significantly, in 1982, 'built form controls', heritage precincts, and the reintroduction of height limits to ensure light and air reached the city's streets were put in place under the leadership of State Labour Minister for Planning, Evan Walker, under the auspices of an 'Interim Development Order' (IDO). It was under Walker's guiding hand that the 'valley' of sightlines protecting the Shrine of Remembrance was enforced and a 40-metre height limit along the Swanston Street corridor was reintroduced. A height corridor also protected the vista of Parliament House up Bourke Street, and, through height controls, the Yarra River, Victoria Market and other parks and gardens were protected from overshadowing.

Thirty years on and the horse has bolted. Despite the recovery of 'street architecture' engineered by Melbourne City Council's Urban Design Unit under the leadership of Rob Adams and the emergence of Melbourne's much celebrated laneway culture that has drawn the envy and emulation of other state capital cities, the city has literally had its head focused on its shoes. Melbourne has sprouted a field of tall towers that have shown little sign of slowing their inexorable rise to the heavens. The 1982 guiding principle of the urban 'valley' has been followed but with virtually no limit to the height of the skyscraper 'hills' on either side.

Ironically, standing in the way of these new towers has been the *bête noir* of the 1930s city – the 1960s office building. Scores of 1960s buildings have been lost in the race for height, and many are still in danger. In the 1960s, politics, modernist office slabs and new public plazas wrought havoc on the 19th century city. But now, the recent thirst for the removal of many of these same slabs and plazas and, in one case, demolition by technical neglect, is repeating another cyclical destruction of Melbourne's evolving urban identity.

Two notable 1960s sites, both originally set aside for public use in Hoddle's 1837 plan and later designated as public markets, stand as conspicuous losses. Built in 1962, the Southern Cross Hotel was the first post-war American-style international hotel in Melbourne. It was never loved architecturally, but urbanistically its central plaza, shopping arcades and ten-pin bowling alley represented a new idea of public space. However, fading economic fortune by the mid-1990s led to its partial then complete demolition by 2003 and two office towers were constructed in its place, though thankfully a laneway was inserted between the two, and a measure of public access and site porosity was ensured. Unfortunately the development lacks a sense of the larger scale of the courtyard plaza, and more importantly, the sense that this site, historically, was part of a broader commitment to the public realm.

The Western Market buildings on Collins Street were also demolished by 1960 despite frequent calls for a public plaza and garden to be located there. Significantly, there was no question that the site not be stripped of its public

use or lose public ownership by Melbourne City Council. Yet by 1959 the site had been leased to National Mutual, enabling the construction of the National Mutual Centre (1965) but with the stipulation that a major proportion of the site be given over to a public plaza with parking beneath. The plaza design, while not aesthetically excellent, at the very least gave a new sense of open space and a generosity of scale to a 1960s city that was rapidly losing its sense of urbanity with the rise of the skyscrapers across its landscape. In 1992, the site was sold to National Mutual. The Council had given up one of its key urban assets.

In 2012, marble spandrel panels on the tower began to fail and fall, endangering pedestrians. The daunting prospect of its repair doomed the National Mutual's ongoing survival, as did a report by one of Melbourne's most eminent heritage experts with phrases such as "meretricious gold strips" and asking: "How far down the scale of mediocrity does one draw the line for preservation?" There was no understanding of shifting 1960s aesthetics and the rise of an ornamental formalism that has, even now, not been analysed either by architectural historians or heritage professionals. Comparison with other buildings by the same firm and other comparably scaled structures would have made clear the building's significance.

So a handsome 1960s building is demolished and central Melbourne's largest public open space has been sacrificed to market gain. Further, the proposal to replace it with a tower over 200 metres tall, and which will overshadow the Yarra River and historic Customs House, breaks all the cardinal rules that have stood in place since 1982 and sets a precedent for similar developments to follow. At street level, two alternatives have been proposed – one indicates a token public space along Market Street, the other has the ubiquitous "lane" treatment splitting the development in two. Nonetheless, the plaza has gone completely and little or no green space has replaced it.

What is at stake here is that, while the proposals at ground level are not in themselves flawed architecturally or urbanistically, the large-scale open space of the 1960s plaza is irreplaceable. There is a danger here of being 'laned' out, of losing the sense of relief that comes from a mix of large and small scale urban spaces. If the National Mutual Centre had been considered heritage – and a strong argument could have been made for it to be considered so – then this space would have been saved. The building might have been restored and further, inventive designs sought for a new urban forest for this space. There is little doubt that the heat island effects of central Melbourne will escalate dramatically in the next three decades. Every effort should be made not to sacrifice open space where trees, plants and grass might be planted. This development should also not be allowed to overshadow the Yarra River. That it is even being countenanced beggars belief.

The failings of the 1960s city have long been acknowledged. But there needs to be awareness of the potential failings of Melbourne's current drive for high-density at seemingly any cost. It appears that there is no current vision for the city's ideal physical form and there is no coherent strategy of urban design that recognises the visual status and historic significance of the post-war city. In Melbourne, it should be possible to retain the city's rich mix of heritage buildings and spaces from all of the decades of its development. Each has lessons and value, and each in some respects protects its predecessor.

As Don Draper looks out wistfully from his 1960s office, contemplating his imminent fall from grace, Melbourne is about to do the same. Risking everything for greed, with uncultured politicians who ignore expert advice, the city's embrace of no clear height controls nor vision for its physical form, its acceptance of a planning system where legally supported appeal can and does overturn what ought be legally binding controls, and with an unrealistic expectation about the central city's capacity to continue to provide the amenity for which it prides itself and markets itself upon, Melbourne needs to take stock and pause before it's too late. Otherwise, its fall will be irrevocable and, like *Mad Men*, Melbourne's 1960s city will be the stuff of tragic nostalgia rather than an intrinsic and visible part of its ongoing and necessary history.