

In a little under three decades Melbourne's Yarra River has been transformed from an industrial sewer to the centre of city life. Here Major Projects Minister Tim Pallas talks about how the Yarra has gone from an embarrassment to a highlight of Melbourne.



Tim Pallas MP  
Minister for Major Projects

Melbourne in the early 1980s was anything but lively.

After two decades of unplanned and barely regulated high rise development, the city was for most simply a place to work. People came in the morning and left in late afternoon leaving the CBD dead after dark and empty on weekends.

In planning terms, central Melbourne was typical of many modern cities – a doughnut city with nothing in its centre.<sup>1</sup> Professor Norman Day surveyed a bleak outlook in his 1978 article 'An empty useless city centre', writing:

*"Effective city planning has been almost unknown in Melbourne for at least 30 or 40 years. For the ordinary Melburnian that means our city has been progressively destroyed. It no longer contains the attraction and charm it once had."*<sup>2</sup>

Fuelled by the gold rush a century before, Melbourne had been regarded as a great Victorian era city 'Marvellous Melbourne' – with vibrant streets and graceful architecture.

However, with a declining industrial and economic base and being outshone by Sydney on the world stage, by the 1980s Melbourne was at a cross roads. Melbourne had to revitalise its public life and transform its economy or die.

Fortunately enlightened leadership was at hand and the Cain Government set a new vision of planning and urban design policy for the city. Men such as the then Planning Minister Evan Walker, and Department of Planning Secretary David Yencken, saw a way to use good urban design to save central Melbourne.

Much has been made of the revitalisation of central Melbourne since the 1980s. The 'Melbourne miracle', documented in the City of Melbourne's Places for People research,<sup>3</sup> attracted increased visitation and tourism to the city and brought new vigour to the economy. Melbourne's active street life has received great publicity and our laneway culture is now so well regarded that even Sydney is trying to replicate it – perhaps the ultimate compliment from our greatest rival.

Less well celebrated is the transformation of the Yarra River corridor.

If Melbourne was dull in the 1980s, the Yarra was positively dire. Polluted by decades of industrial use and cut off from the city by railway lines, the dirty brown river was at best an embarrassment to Melburnians and at worst a health hazard.<sup>4</sup> The joke behind the Moomba Birdman Rally was not that the participants thought they could fly but that they were intentionally jumping into the Yarra!

At the same time as Walker and Yencken were developing the blueprint for a new active central Melbourne, they realised the Yarra's potential as an area for recreation and culture. In his book *Fluid City*, Professor Kim Dovey identifies three principles developed by the pair that have defined development of the riverside ever since: that the area should follow the lead of the Arts Centre and have a cultural and entertainment focus; that it should be a mixed use area with a variety of different building forms; and that pedestrian access should be the paramount consideration.<sup>5</sup>



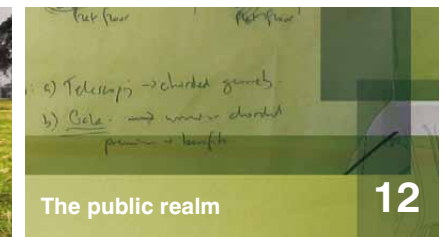
Spirit of space

6



Sports precinct set to soar

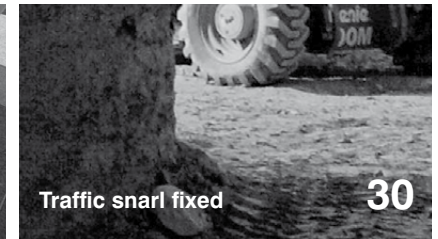
10

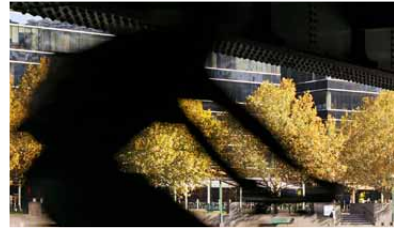


The public realm

12

# MELBOURNE RETURNS TO THE YARRA





The result is a place that is all about people: a wholly accessible place to relax and have fun; a place to walk or run; or one to just sit in and watch everyone else passing by. It is Melbourne's first true mall and our most successful pedestrian environment. The *Places for People* research found weekday pedestrian numbers had increased by 52 per cent between 1994 and 2004 while on weekends numbers were up by 73 per cent.<sup>6</sup>

The excitement of what has happened on the Yarra struck me for the first time last year during a visit to the new Melbourne Convention Centre. Looking back up the river from the centre I saw how the river has become Melbourne's greatest public thoroughfare and civic space.

If you think about it, along each bank are some of our greatest public buildings, open spaces and attractions – Flinders Street Station, the Arts Centre, Federation Square, Birrarung Marr, Rod Laver Arena and the new rectangular stadium.

Three decades of both public and private investment in buildings has drawn Melbourne's cultural and public life down to the riverside, and now when Melburnians come together to celebrate – New Year's Eve or the Commonwealth Games – they go to the Yarra. It is our de facto city square, the heart of our city.

While the CBD might be the retail and business zone, Melbourne's cultural cornerstones – art and sport – feature along the Yarra. The city's focus has shifted south along the river, with the Olympic Park sports precinct to the east and the Southbank arts precinct to the west. The centre of Melbourne's life is no longer the intersection of Bourke and Swanston, it is actually Princes Bridge.

Of course the Yarra has always been a centre of public life; it is just that we forgot about it for the greater part of last century. The lower Yarra was a traditional meeting point for the Wurundjeri people and when white people came to settle, the river's fresh water was the reason for Melbourne's existence.<sup>7</sup> For Melbourne, finding the river again is like meeting an old friend.

With this in mind the 30-year strategy to turn Melbourne back to its river has been an extraordinary success – the Yarra has been reborn as an environment<sup>8</sup> and remade as a public space. Melbourne is now actively engaged with the river and becomes more so every day thanks to the Brumby Government's commitment to the public realm and investment in public infrastructure. Three current government projects highlight the river's complete transformation.

The Melbourne Convention Centre is not just a conference venue – it creates a whole new tourism, hospitality and retail precinct linked to its surrounds with pedestrian and cycle links in every direction. The project has taken a redundant area used for car storage and turned it into a new business and tourism destination projected to bring nearly \$200 million a year into Victoria.

Further upstream in the sporting precinct, the rectangular stadium provides a spectacular new attraction on the river bank. The stadium is not only destined to become an instant Melbourne icon; its unique world leading design brings the Olympic Park precinct closer to the water.

However, it is the Hamer Hall redevelopment scheduled to begin later this year that best displays the river's transformation.

When completed in the early 1980s, the Arts Centre faced onto St Kilda Road, ignoring the then undeveloped Yarra. Regardless, the centre brought people to the area and led to the creation of the Southgate building, and then a series of other developments heading downstream like dominoes.

Now 30 years later, the refurbishment of Hamer Hall will turn the Arts Centre back to the Yarra with a new active river frontage opening up the building's lower floors and removing the dark empty undercroft. The river can no longer be ignored.

The Hamer Hall project bookends the Yarra's transformation and vindicates the vision of the Cain Government three decades ago. Melbourne has returned itself to the river and in doing so will never look back.

1 City of Melbourne/Jan Gehl, 2005, *Places for People*, p.96.

2 Ibid, p.4

3 Ibid, p.96

4 Dovey, K, 2005, *Fluid City*, UNSW Press, p.7.

5 Ibid, p.36.

6 City of Melbourne/Jan Gehl, 2005, *Places for People*, p.83.

7 Source: [www.yarrariver.info/history.htm](http://www.yarrariver.info/history.htm)

8 Who wasn't surprised and thrilled to see the dolphins swimming upstream as far as the Swan St bridge last year?

