

ENTERTAINMENT ART & DESIGN **ARTS**

What's next for the Melbourne Arts Precinct?

By Debbie Cuthbertson
26 April 2018 — 3:00pm

The people of Melbourne don't know how lucky they are.

To have so many cultural institutions, arts organisations and creative companies within such close proximity is a luxury few cities achieve.

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New York's Highline has become a major tourist attraction. Could a similar pedestrian-friendly connection work in Southbank?

Photo: Supplied

Hong Kong has spent a cool \$35 billion creating such a precinct from scratch with its enormous new M+ Cultural District in West Kowloon.

What has evolved here in the space between the Yarra River, St Kilda Road, Sturt Street and Kings Way over the past 60 years is the envy of many.

But are we making the most of it? Hardly.

Could it be so much more? Hell yes.

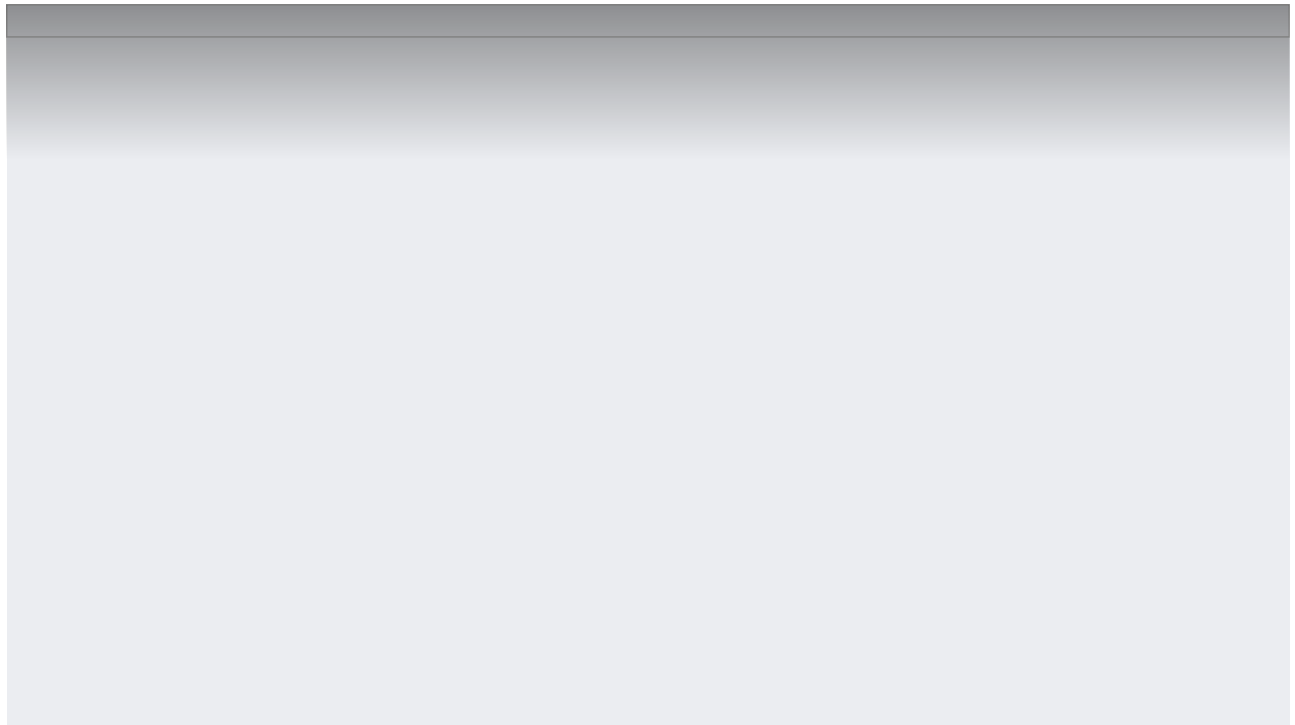
Why not build a green corridor, like New York's Highline, stretching from St Kilda Road to Sturt Street, suggests architect Kerstin Thompson.

Rename it, appoint a cultural commissar to support and develop it, and bring in a fleet of driverless electric cars to help people navigate its brutally unfriendly urban geography, says Australian arts supremo Michael Lynch.

Or how about something really radical, Futurists in Venice-style, posits artist Shaun Gladwell: archive Southbank using virtual and augmented reality technology, then return the whole thing to a new simulation: its pre-white settlement state.

The pillars of Victoria's cultural life, such as the National Gallery of Victoria and the Melbourne Theatre Company, are in rude good health, posting record ticket sales and visitor numbers.

Having the Malthouse Theatre sitting next to the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, dance company Chunky Move and the Victorian College of the Arts creates a kinetic kinship that is a creative goldmine.



The Buxton Contemporary building, by Fender Katsalidis architects, as seen from its Southbank Boulevard street frontage.

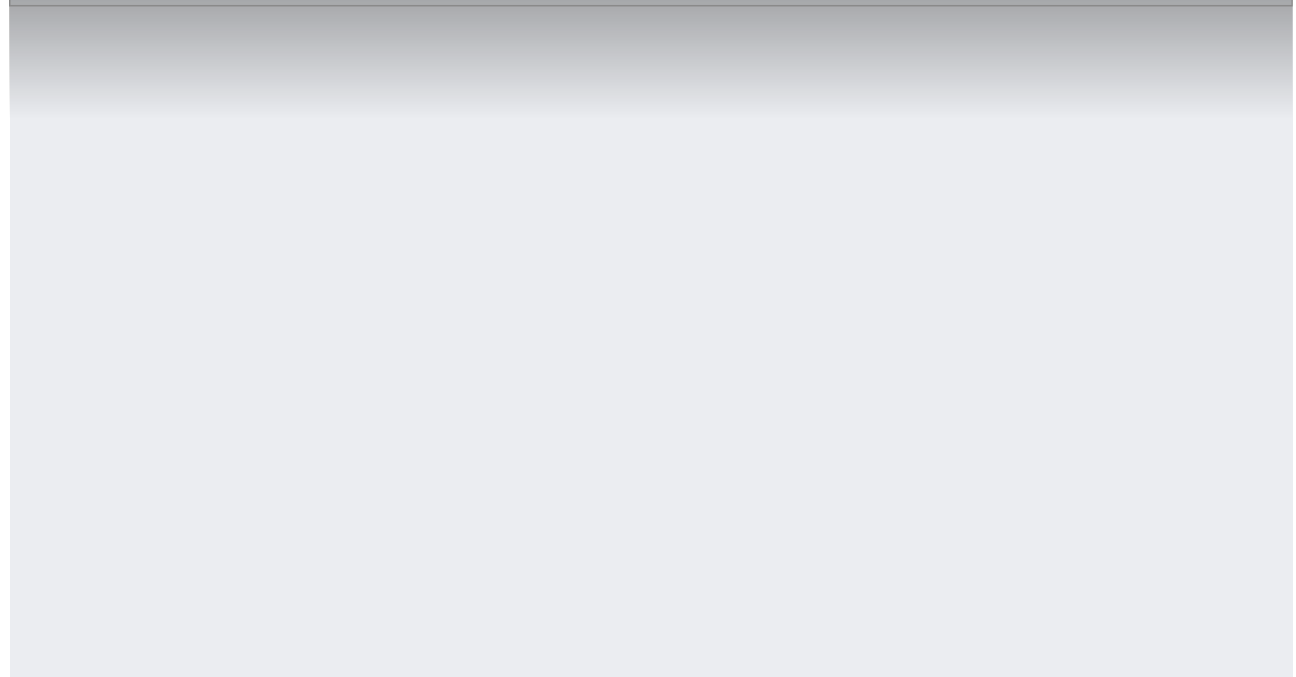
A state-sponsored industry strategy and planning changes have helped draw emerging creative industries and businesses, such as video gaming companies, to the area.

Philanthropists have also invested in the area: Michael Buxton donated \$16 million for a gallery at the VCA to house his \$10 million private art collection.

Despite all its successes though, navigating Southbank is often a drag.

Many of its institutions are inward facing, enclosed from the street. There is no clear path between its key tenants, just a series of improvised shortcuts and a great big lump of freeway exit cutting through Sturt Street's middle.

Habitat-Filter, a sculpture at the corner of Sturt and Miles streets, Southbank.



Habitat-Filter, a sculpture at the corner of Sturt and Miles streets, Southbank.

Photo: Joe Armao

Ninety per cent of the city's arts agencies and leaders believe Melbourne's cultural offer is not clearly articulated or cutting through, according to a recent Boston Consulting Group report commissioned by the state government on Melbourne as a cultural destination.

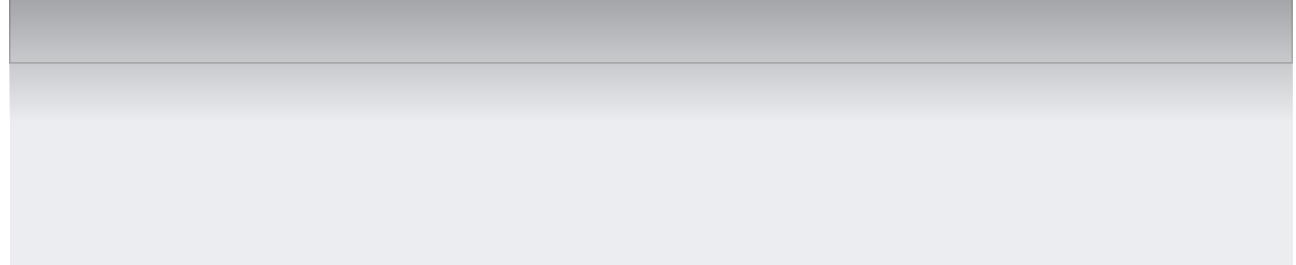
A looming Victorian election and the government's recent purchase of the CUB Building for "cultural" purposes has raised hopes of a big announcement in the state budget on Tuesday that could transform the arts precinct.

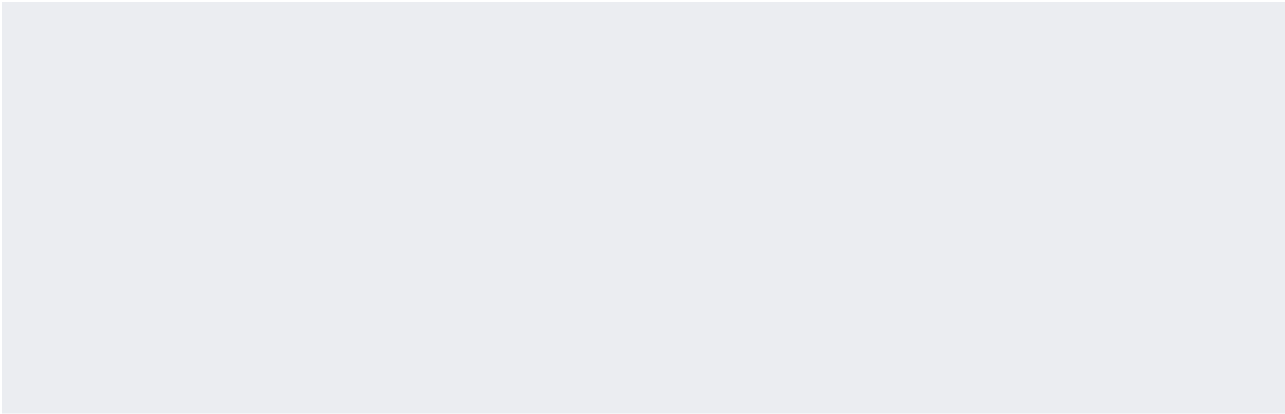
Could it be the longed for NGV Contemporary, filled with director Tony Ellwood's canny acquisitions from some of the art world's biggest superstars?

Will the Arts Centre's years of lobbying for a museum to showcase its massive Performing Arts Collection finally pay off?

Or is something even bigger in the offing, perhaps a plan to open up the rear of both institutions to Sturt Street?

The Arts Centre and its famous spire.





The Arts Centre and its famous spire.

Photo: Leigh Henningham

Arts Centre CEO Claire Spencer, a Brit who worked at the Opera House for a decade before moving to Melbourne, knows better than most how our conglomeration of culture is admired.

Speaking to *The Age* from Dubai after addressing the Global District Network conference a few weeks ago, she noted some in the audience seemed green with envy during her session.

"I'm at a global cultural district conference, where people from all over the world talk about how they get their audiences to engage," she said.

"I just think we're so lucky, we've got that arts precinct right next to the CBD," Spencer said.

"People just love it. I was talking about Melbourne yesterday and there were jealous glances across the room ...

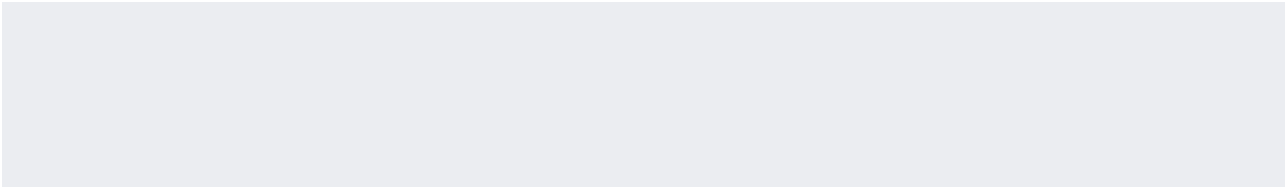
"It's fascinating if you go back to 1957 when they set that land aside, which was such a bold thing to do. And it's really been a 60-year work in progress."

The decision – a year after Melbourne hosted the Olympics – to earmark about 60 hectares for the arts was an incredibly farsighted one, with long-reaching impact. It also took decades to bring to fruition.

What is now Southbank was the traditional land of the Boon Wurrung's Yalukit Willam clan and had been largely swamp and wetlands before white settlement.

The Trocadero Ballroom was demolished to make way for the Arts Centre.





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Photo: Supplied

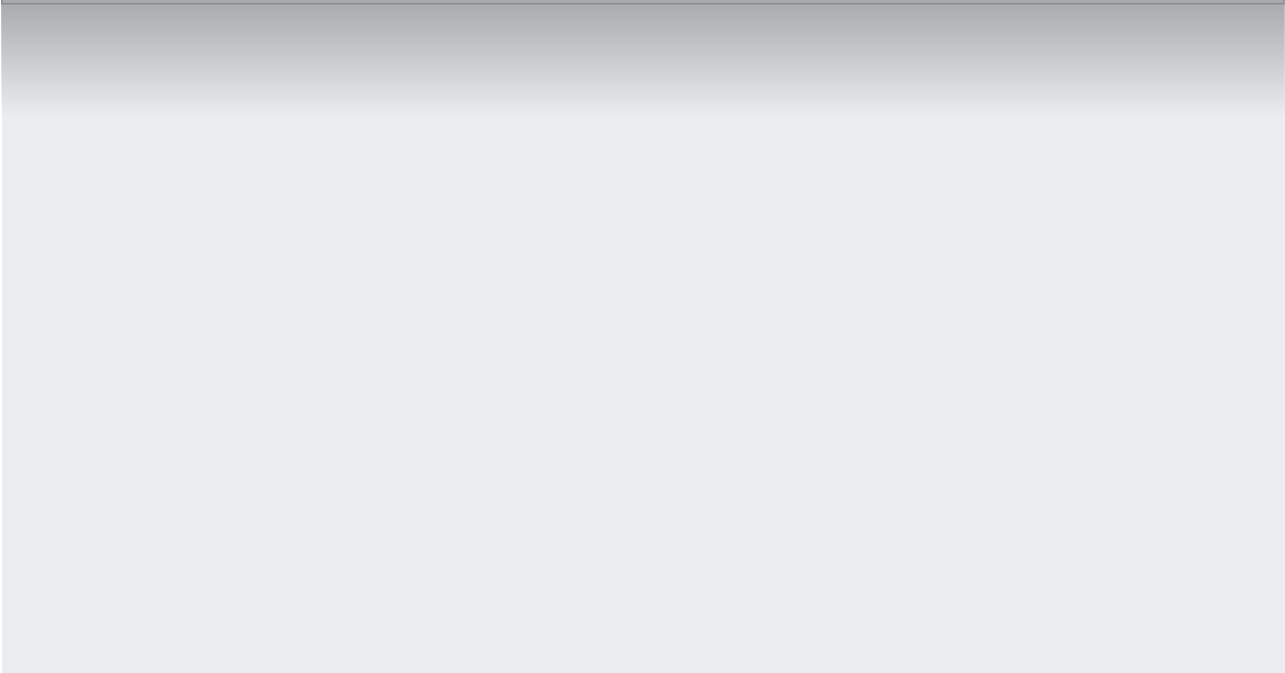
It evolved into an industrial district and over time became a messy collection of old buildings and vacant government land, according to one history of the area.

By the 1940s it was home to the Trocadero dance hall, Glaciarium ice skating rink, Wirth's Park and its resident circus and industry such as the Allens Confectionery factory, with its landmark neon sign.

In 1942 the NGV's trustees and chairman Keith Murdoch suggested a new gallery be built. (At the time it was shoehorned into a corner of the State Library).

The next year, Country Party premier Albert Dunstan proposed just that.

Performers in Wirth's Olympia circus on the land where the NGV now stands.



Performers in Wirth's Olympia circus on the land where the NGV now stands.

Photo: Fairfax Media

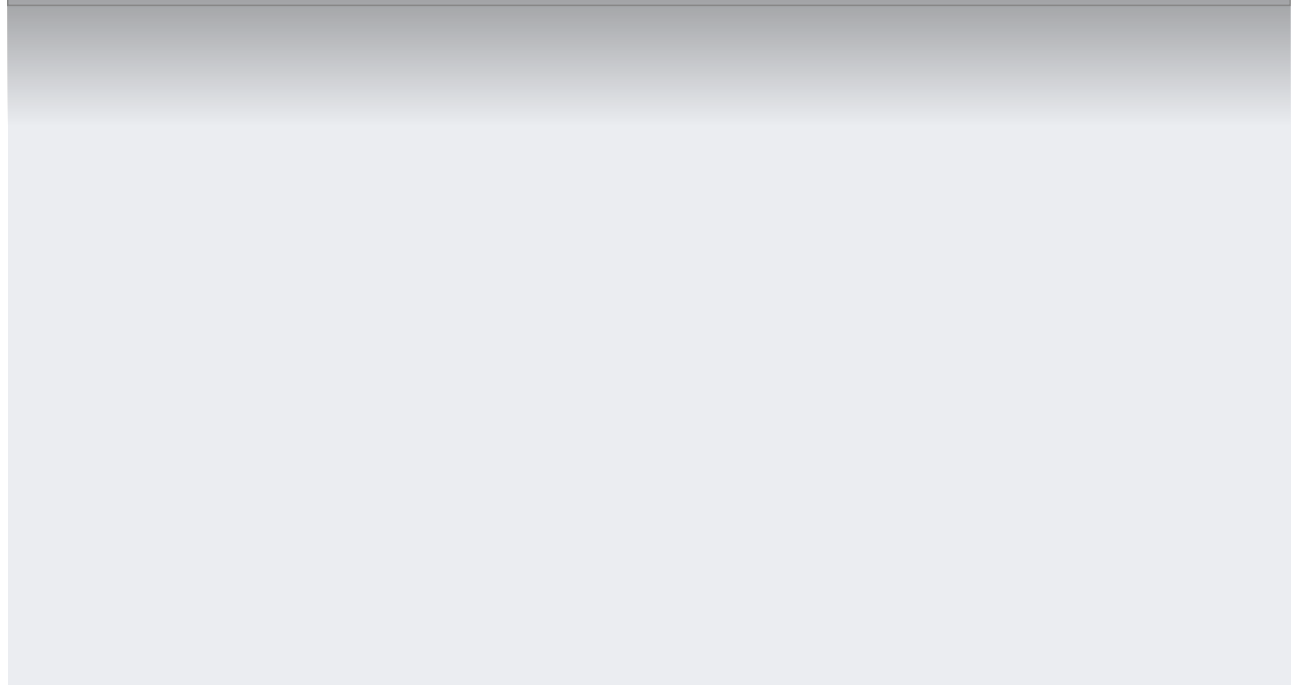
Labor premier John Cain snr passed legislation in 1946 reserving Wirth's Park for a national gallery and cultural centre.

In 1957, Liberal premier Henry Bolte proclaimed it as the site for the National Gallery, but building didn't start until 1962. The Roy Grounds-designed gallery opened in 1968 to widespread acclaim.

It took Bolte's successor Rupert Hamer, who replaced Bolte in 1972, a decade of stewardship of phase two – the Arts Centre and Melbourne Concert Hall – before they opened, ultimately after

Hamer's term as premier ended (the concert hall was named after him in 2012).

An artist's impression of the new Melbourne Conservatorium currently under construction.



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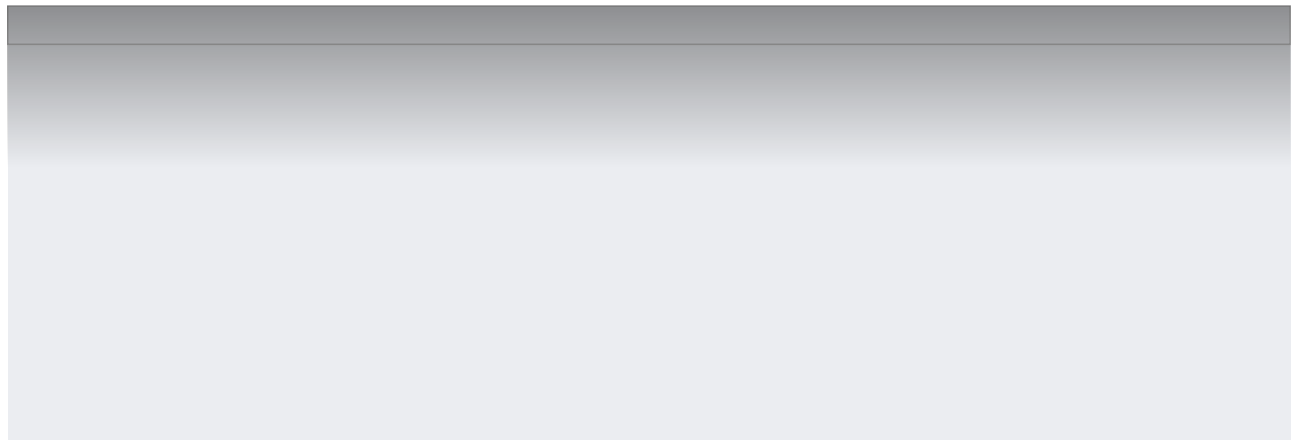
Photo: John Wardle Architects

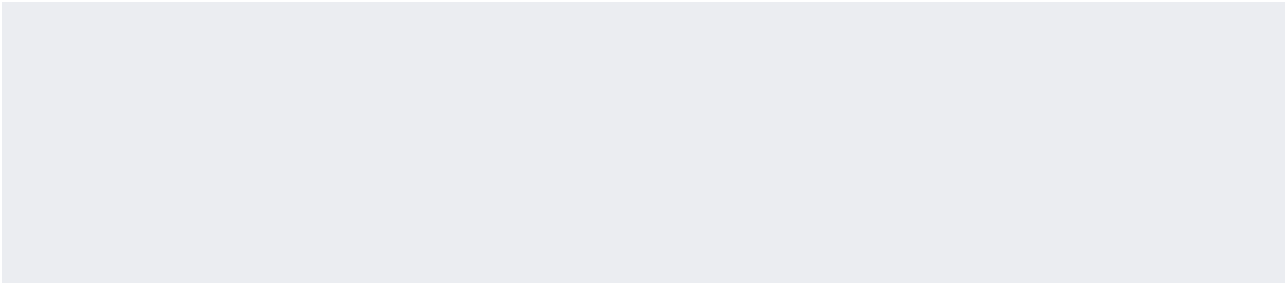
In the decades since, dozens more arts organisations, companies and venues have made Southbank their home.

More recently the precinct has been transformed by the MTC's Southbank Theatre, music venue the Melbourne Recital Centre and the ABC's expanded Southbank Centre, all facing Southbank Boulevard.

The University of Melbourne is building [a \\$105 million Conservatorium](#) at 33 Sturt Street, on what was a car park behind the Recital Centre.

In 2014 a blueprint for the precinct commissioned by the previous Liberal government identified key sites ripe for potential development: the Victoria Police stables, the Defence Force's Victoria Barracks, the CUB/Fosters building and the neighbouring vacant lot of Crown land at 1 City Road.





Testing Grounds is a pop-up arts venue on Crown land at the corner of Sturt Street and City Road.

Photo: Supplied

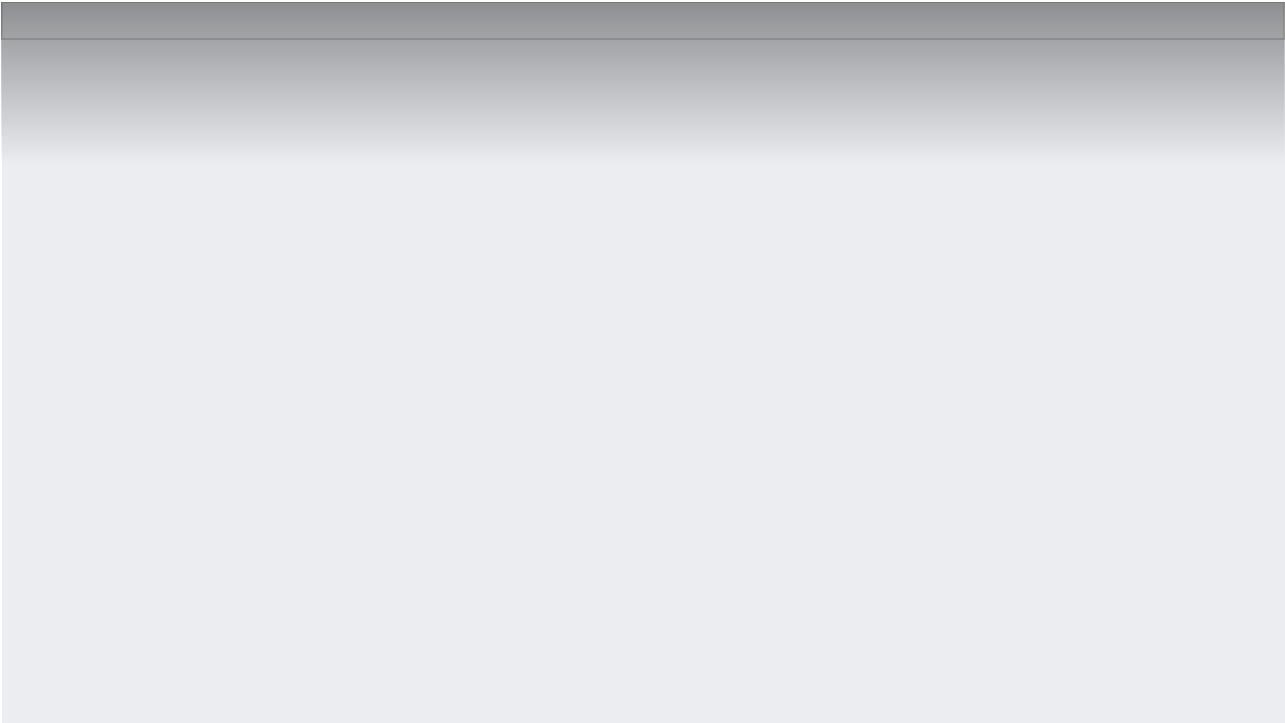
Since then, the stables have been redeveloped and become part of the VCA.

The vacant lot has become an outdoor arts venue, filled with shipping containers and pallets, called Testing Grounds.

The state government bought the CUB building for \$95.5 million, it was revealed in February. It has not specified how it will use the building, but has confirmed it was purchased for its strategic location within the arts precinct.

The final piece of that puzzle is Victoria Barracks, an imposing, enclosed bluestone edifice built in the 1850s.

“Victoria Barracks – currently a walled citadel with no public access or engagement with its neighbourhood – has the potential to become a vibrant part of the Arts Precinct in much the same way that Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney and the Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne have been converted to public and community use,” the blueprint suggests.



The state government has purchased the CUB building in Southbank for \$95 million for cultural purposes.

Photo: Jason South

“Redevelopment could include preservation of heritage elements. Opened up, the grounds and

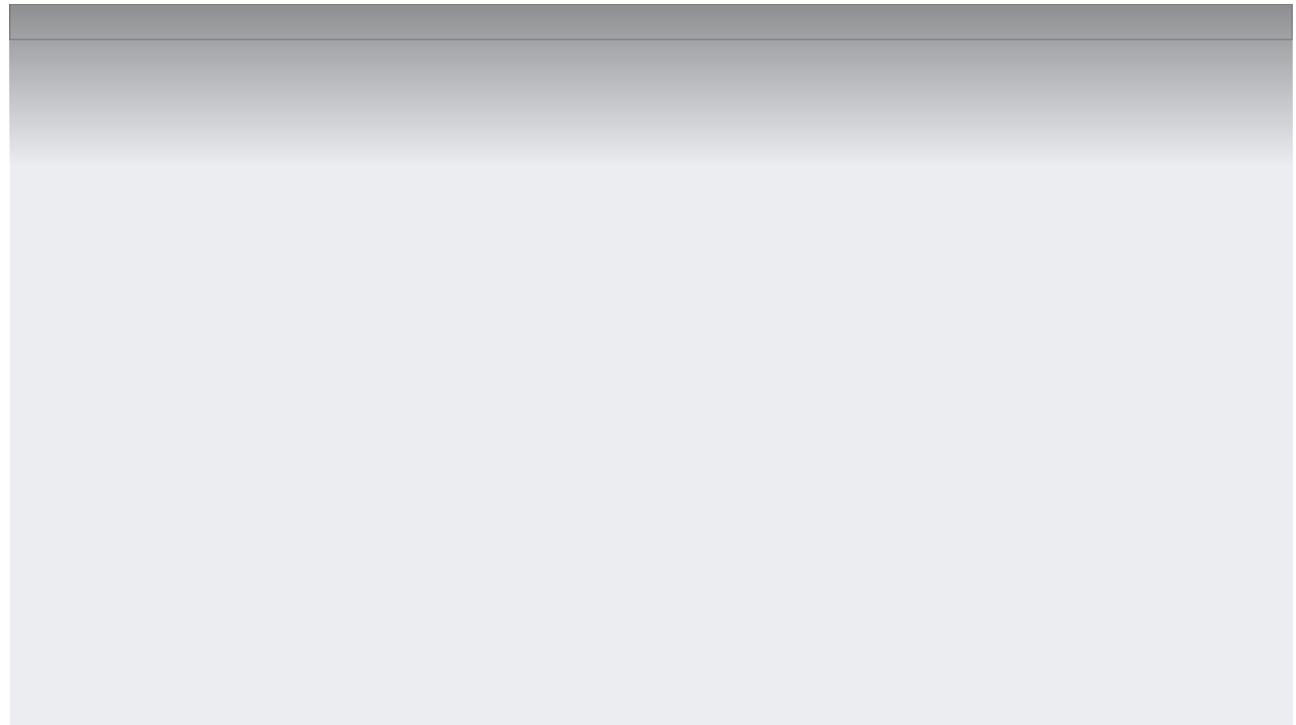
barracks could host markets, festivals and other outdoor events, and new pedestrian pathways would lead from St Kilda Road to Wells Street and beyond, integrating the site into the arts precinct and the civic spine of St Kilda Road.”

In early 2017 the Department of Defence floated plans to sell part of the barracks complex, the Repatriation Hospital, to the state government, although no offer eventuated.

The military has no plans to offload the barracks complex any time soon. “Defence continues to use the broader Victoria Barracks site in Melbourne,” the department said.

In July the City of Melbourne will start work on another project suggested in the blueprint: adding more green spaces to Southbank Boulevard and Dodds Street, and improving access for pedestrians and cyclists.

The council will spend \$25 million over the next year on the works as part of a three-year, \$45 million project to open up Southbank with 1.2 kilometres of bike lanes, more public art and “improved access and activation of Melbourne’s arts and cultural precinct”.



The Melbourne Arts Precinct blueprint suggests that Victoria Barracks become part of the cultural precinct.

Photo: John Woudstra

The state government remains silent on any major announcements related to the arts precinct that may be contained in the budget.

“We’re making sure every organisation and venue in the Arts Precinct at Southbank has something to entertain and inspire every Victorian, as well as being a major tourism drawcard for many years to come,” a spokeswoman for Creative Industries Minister Martin Foley said in response to questions from *The Age*.

“Arts Centre Melbourne continues to plan for the future – in the meantime the government has provided funding for a program of critical maintenance works and upgrades in the theatres building,” she said.

“The government purchased the CUB site in Southbank. CUB are still the building's main tenants, and we are considering all options for the building's future.”

Back in Melbourne last week, Arts Centre CEO Claire Spencer said she was an "impatient optimist" when asked about the chances of securing funding for the performing arts museum in the state budget.

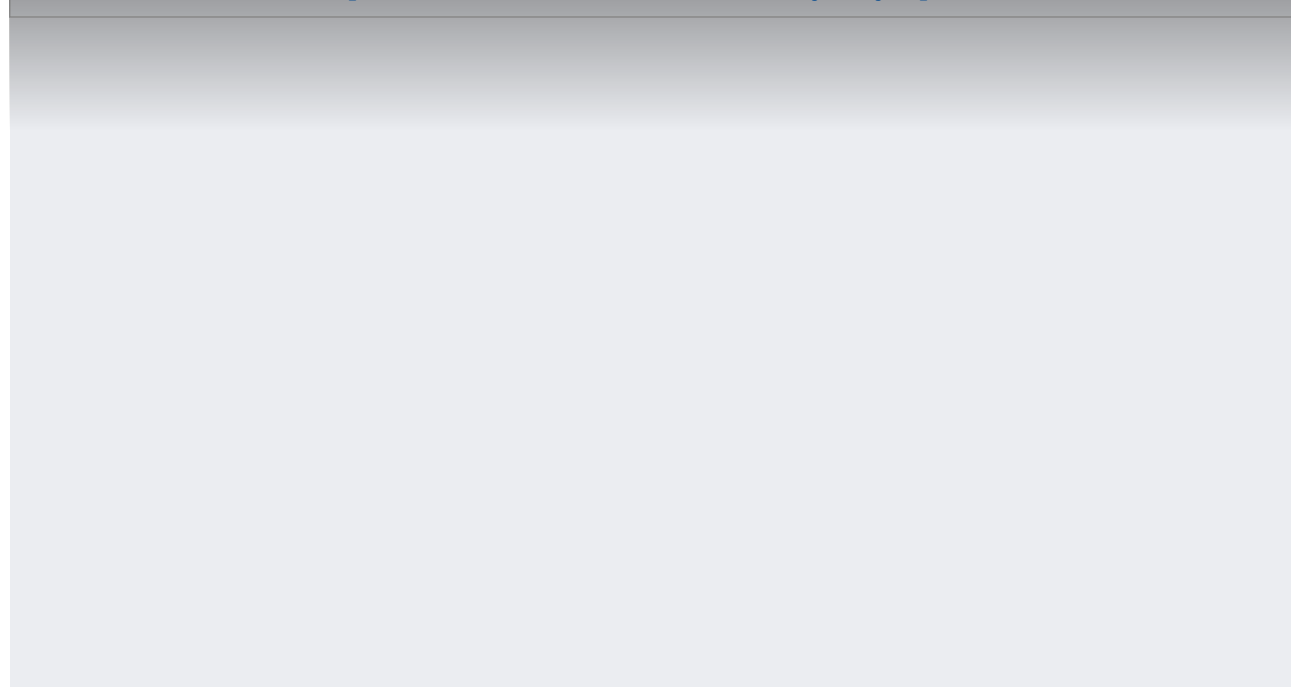
She is hopeful the state government will find money for a redevelopment of the Arts Centre building, proposed after the Hamer Hall revamp, that would open up the precinct to pedestrians.

She's a fan of the Highline concept too, and sees how it could work in Southbank.

"When I first went to the Highline in New York my immediate thought was wouldn't it be tremendous if we had something like this in Melbourne, she said. "Not to replicate it, but joining up assets in a way that is creative, engaging and takes advantage of these amazing institutions that we already have.

"I would say the [potential for greater] access, connectivity and the free flow of audiences and ideas and creatives is incredibly exciting."

Arts Centre CEO Claire Spencer, who used to work for the Sydney Opera House.



Arts Centre CEO Claire Spencer, who used to work for the Sydney Opera House.
Photo: Nic Walker

Asked about the chances of a big announcement for the Arts Centre in the budget, Ms Spencer was diplomatic. (Questions to the state government about its plans went unanswered by deadline.)

"This government and the previous one have successively understood what they've got here," she said. "The challenge is how we continue to evolve it.

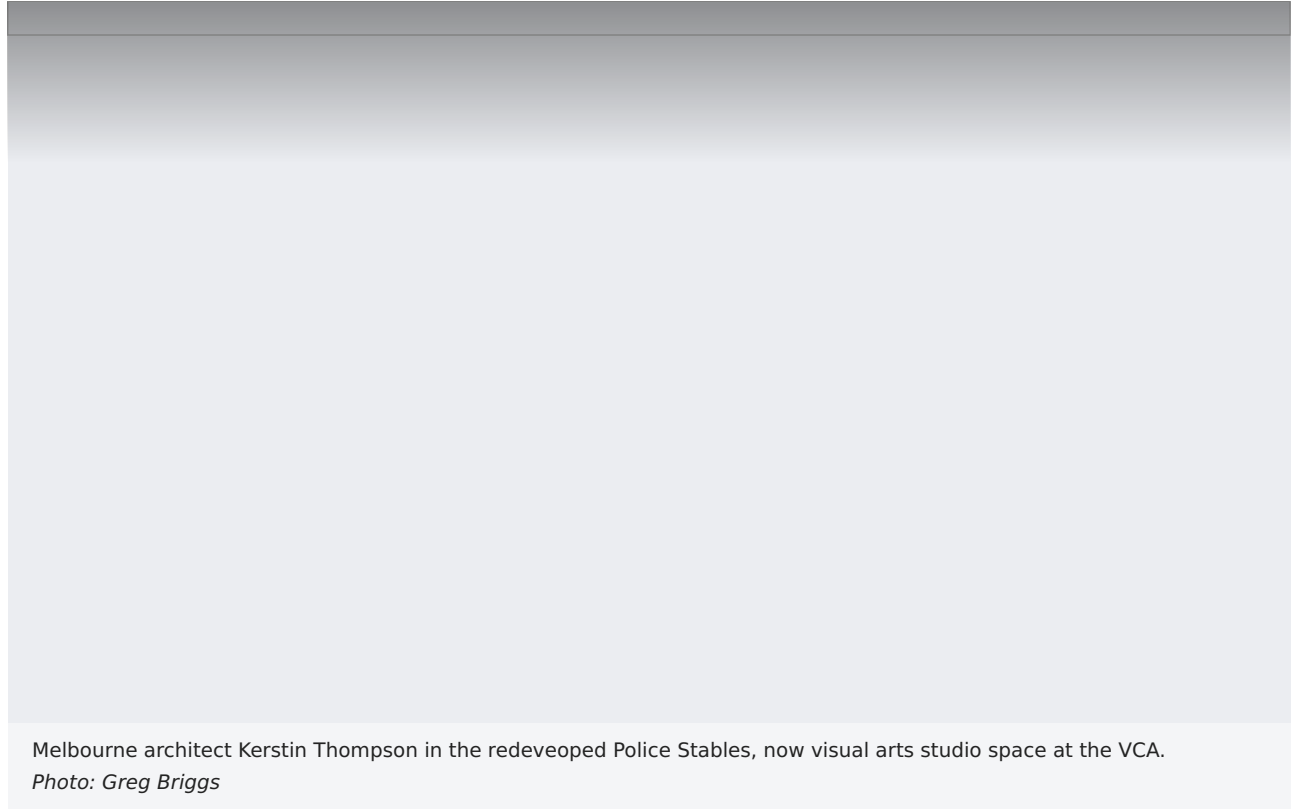
"That's why Melbourne has a great competitive advantage, because the thinking that went into the precinct in the late '50s is urban planning at its best. But it's not quite finished, it's

continuing to develop.

"When the Arts Centre and NGV were conceived they were very much fronted onto St Kilda Road. What's happened in the 60 years since that commitment was made is of course that the broader precinct has sprung up behind it.

"The roadways are extremely challenging. But I think this precinct has fantastic bones. The institutions that sit within them are all within their own right world class, and when you put them together it's really world class."

MIGHT WE SUGGEST...



Melbourne architect Kerstin Thompson in the redeveloped Police Stables, now visual arts studio space at the VCA.
Photo: Greg Briggs

KERSTIN THOMPSON ARCHITECTS

The Melbourne firm recently redesigned the former Victoria Police stables in Dodds Street, Southbank, into visual arts studios for the Victorian College of the Arts.

The biggest bugbear is the precinct's lack of connectivity and lack of life after hours.

For us the priority would be fixing the two big pedestrian blockages at the Westgate Freeway and the end of Sturt Street followed by doing something with Victoria Barracks.

The deathly non-use of the precinct at night, apart from post-theatre goers on St Kilda Road, would be transformed if there were additional living quarters in the area.

What's needed is not more of the same demographic – empty nesters – but an expanded repertoire of folks who call the arts precinct home. Students and artists should be accommodated in alternative types of dwellings: living studios.

Taking over of the Barracks for creative industries and organisations makes good sense, but

consider making it a 24-7 vibrant community of people who use the as both work and home, not as a 9-5 enclave.

We imagine that the arts could infiltrate the gardens and vice versa with an art trail or landscape networks that interconnect the two, acknowledging that the arts and gardens are both forms of cultural expression.

Forge a generous and easy connection between St Kilda Road and Sturt Street, either down or with a New York-style Highline.

Influential and outspoken arts administrator Michael Lynch.

Influential and outspoken arts administrator Michael Lynch.
Photo: Steven Siewert

MICHAEL LYNCH, ARTS ADMINISTRATOR

From CEO of Sydney Opera House and the Australia Council to London's Southbank Centre and Hong Kong's West Kowloon Cultural District, Lynch is one of Australia's most experienced arts administrators.

Appoint a Cultural Commissar for the renamed district who looks at how the individual organisations work in harmony and together to improve their offers and facilities.

The name - Southbank in Melbourne, the same in Brisbane and my own Southbank in London - shows a distinct lack of imagination.

It's time for Melbourne to make it a distinctive part of the country, not a replica of other places.

Southbank in London works because it is contained and accessible and has a preponderance of arts activities with appropriate eating, drinking, sleeping and living facilities at close quarters and in balance and harmony with arts activities. It has worked for 70 years and it just gets better.

I just don't get Australia's obsession with putting cultural venues alongside casinos and trying

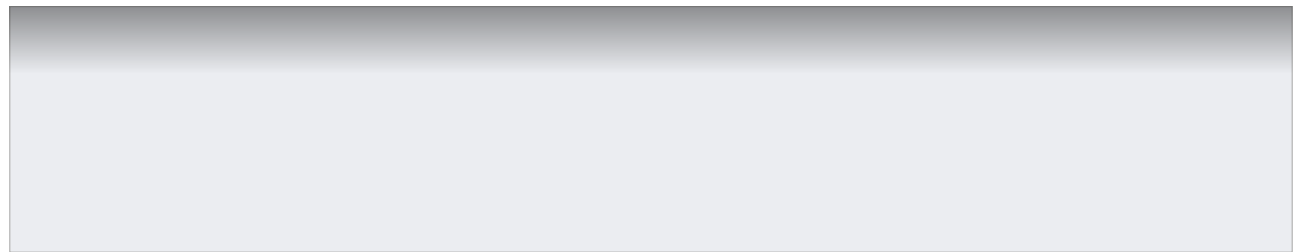
to sell them as one attractive cultural offer. Would we have ever considered putting the Opera House inside the running rail at Flemington? Time to build a wall between the cultural venues and Crown Casino and allow each to their own.

In Melbourne, accessibility across the various parts of Southbank is frankly appalling and not up to Western best practice. I no longer visit many parts because of the difficulties in getting around. Government should address this in a far-sighted and caring manner.

Perhaps it is the ideal place to only have driverless electric transport in Melbourne for the convenience of all the patrons.

Cultural entities in Melbourne and elsewhere are notorious in pursuing their own plans at the expense of others and this leads to limited opportunities for successful placemaking and urban planning alongside their own cultural aspirations.

Why did they build all those individual buildings - the Recital Centre, the Southbank Theatre, Malthouse and ACCA alongside the glorious standalone Arts Centre and National Gallery of Victoria - and not think how better to support and develop them?



Shaun Gladwell shot images in Southbank, including outside the Arts Centre and NGV, with his VR camera.

Photo: Courtesy the Artist, Anna Schwartz Gallery and BADFAITH.

London-based Australian artist and co-founder of content collective BADFAITH. On a recent visit to Melbourne he walked around Southbank several with his virtual reality camera, in the style of 1929 Soviet documentary *Man With A Camera*.

I was recording my path through Southbank with a kind of optimistic need to archive this part of the city in the light of change in its near future.

My trail through Southbank is essentially that of a tourist. When I 'do' Southbank, I try to do it all in one catenated hit. Starting with ACCA and snooping around VCA and now the new Buxton Contemporary, then onto the NGV. For family and personal reasons, I invariably stop at Shrine of Remembrance. I then end up skateboarding and bleeding in the Riverside Skate Park.

My first problem with any redevelopment of Southbank is the fact that the Melbourne Art Precinct blueprint deals with just that - arts-related institutions and landmarks. I'm seeing a separation between a sports facilities and other cultural sites, from Gardens to Museums and all due to old vertical value systems.

That other Southbank arts precinct I 'use' in London celebrates skateboarding and other urban activity in its brutalist undercroft and very does well to integrate urban life into a more institutional experience of the Hayward gallery and British Film Institute.

If I were to think in terms of extending DCM's original work to Southbank with their promenades, then there would be a need for more extreme uninterrupted pedestrian ventricles and arteries and between all institutions - and yes, including the skate park.

Build wider and totally uninterrupted concourses, and if the roads remain active, sink them into their own subterranean system or commit to pedestrian under and overpasses everywhere. Either strategy would be an incredible asset for skateboarder citizens as much as other contemporary flâneurs. This would all spell more life.

More street food (not just for festivals and events) would act as a culinary connective tissue throughout Southbank and this would motivate a generation that will soon access all cultural material virtually. Smelling and tasting will become more important against optical power in an age of deep simulation.

Wider boulevards will need to lead to program-shaking moments like institutional swapping and other incubators of creative confusion that will shift Southbank out of the 'pleasant', conservative, evenly paced and spaced precinct it sees itself as.

Parts of the precinct must not be programmed or curated or landscaped at all - spaces should be purposefully left over in planning. I consider the now world-famous aesthetic of laneways running off Flinders Lane as a contemporary street art.

ACDC Lane et al act as creative stoae within the modernist grid of the city, whereas Southbank is the open and energy diluting agora that needs a new, robust circulatory system to deliver more lifeblood to its cultural organs - without having to play 'frogger' with road traffic.

I'd go for more uninterrupted levels of access below and/or above - I'm thinking of an admixture of [Paolo Soleri's sci-fi like The City in the Image of Man](#) with [Olalekan Jeyifous' shanty megastructures](#) thrown in for creative chaos.

If the city's burghers could never agree on something as radical as no broken pedestrian access throughout and generous amounts of non-programmed space, then I'm going to think like the Futurists did with Venice: lets just level it and start again.

But before the bulldozers enter the scene, I'll use current scanning photogrammetry, VR and AR to totally archive Southbank before transforming it back it to new simulation - pre-settlement, pre John Batman. The old/current Southbank could then be a digital spectre you may or may not wish to switch on when moving through this part of the city.

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