

ART

# Yellow Peril, public art that made a city see red

PERIL IN THE SQUARE:  
THE SCULPTURE THAT  
CHALLENGED A CITY

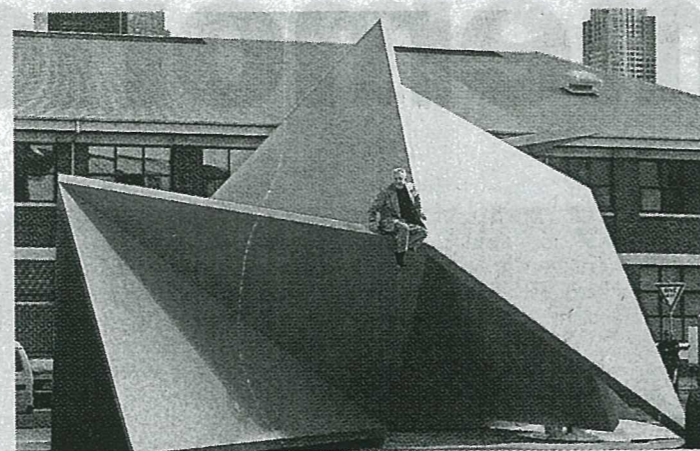
By Geoffrey J. Wallis  
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Alan Attwood Reviewer

Every so often it is decreed that Melbourne needs a landmark, an icon, something to denote the city. This ignores the fact that Melbourne already has its symbol — not as instantly recognisable as Sydney's Opera House or Harbour Bridge, but probably more reflective of the city itself: Ron Robertson-Swann's sculpture, *Vault*.

It says much about Melbourne that this sculpture is still better known by a nickname that preceded its creation: the Yellow Peril. Part of the blame for this must rest with the sculptor himself, as it wasn't until September 1980, more than two years after his concept first attracted headlines, that Robertson-Swann settled on *Vault*.

Previously, he had referred to



Sculptor Ron Robertson-Swann and the work that set off a storm.

PICTURE: SIMON SCHLUTER

it as "The Thing"; the workmen who took more than eight weeks to construct it christened it "Steelhenge". But the Peril it was, and the Peril it has stayed.

There are many ironies in the saga of its genesis, rejection and rehabilitation, not least the fact that it has outlasted not only the council that condemned it but also the city square for which it was conceived — now, as Geoffrey J. Wallis puts it in this welcome account, "a cut-down remnant

of its former self, little more than a forecourt of a large hotel".

And while it is tempting to suggest that the people of Melbourne and their leaders were a much more timid lot in the late 1970s, one need only juxtapose the words "shard" and "Federation Square" to wonder if much has changed.

*Vault* was purpose-built public art. The controversy it caused is a case study in what happens when you let a

committee (or council) control a creative endeavour.

The City Square architects wanted something as a focus point for the square; something contemporary; sculpture *a la mode*. What the city got, after a competition decided in May 1978, was officially described as "a yellow painted fabricated steel construction, large in size and brightly coloured".

It existed at the time only as a small balsa-wood model, built by Roberston-Swann, then aged 37, in his Sydney studio, with drawings of the proposed square pinned to his walls. The creative process was one of trial and error; the sabotage effort was more calculated and brutal.

It began in December 1978, when councillors first saw the proposed sculpture. They were soon split, with one faction led by Don Osborne ("Why can't we have a pleasant fountain?"); the other by the much younger Irvin Rockman, who had replaced Osborne as lord mayor and championed a "startling and outstanding work".

It was a gift for town hall reporters. A public brawl over a sculpture was much sexier than arguments about rates. As *Blue*

*Poles* had proved a decade earlier, art is never more newsworthy than when it is deemed controversial.

The sculpture was intended to be in place for the royal opening of the square in 1980. But, rather like Athens and its Olympics, the completion of the square project was always going to be a close-run thing: "good enough for a fast-moving Queen", one architect declared.

Even the Queen bought into the issue, reportedly wondering if the sculpture might be painted "a more agreeable colour".

This should be taken with a royal serving of salt, although its colour had much to do with the extreme reactions. To Robertson-Swann, the intense yellow suited the form and made it vibrant, especially at night. It certainly livened up a grey precinct. But before long all sorts of erudite theorising was swirling around its colour, which was likened to "an old blonde girlfriend pouting at you".

Full marks for prescience go to the director of the National Gallery, Eric Rowllison, who commented: "In contemporary

art, it inevitably takes 20 years for public acceptance to catch up with the vision of artists." He was spot on. Osborne and his allies won their battle — *Vault* was ignominiously exiled to the mud of an unmade Batman Park in July 1981 — but lost the war. Their council was sacked. And when, late in 2002, *Vault* was moved (again) to its new home in Southbank — after two decades as a homeless shelter, favoured target for graffiti artists, and even a training aid for visiting footballers, who appreciated the unpredictable bounce — Lord Mayor John So welcomed it as "an old and respected friend".

For Robertson-Swann, this represented a happy ending to an ordeal over his first major public art work. "Nobody came along and just shot me," he said in 1981. "They have been dropping grains of rice on my head at hourly intervals for 2½ years and after a while each grain is like a sledge-hammer."

He didn't say if it was saffron rice. But now it seems all the fuss helped turn his creation into a Melbourne landmark: confronting; intriguing; and brilliantly, happily yellow.