

One sculpture's perilous journey

BOOK
PERIL IN THE SQUARE:
THE SCULPTURE THAT
CHALLENGED A CITY

by Geoffrey J. Wallis, Indra Publishing

Penny Webb Reviewer

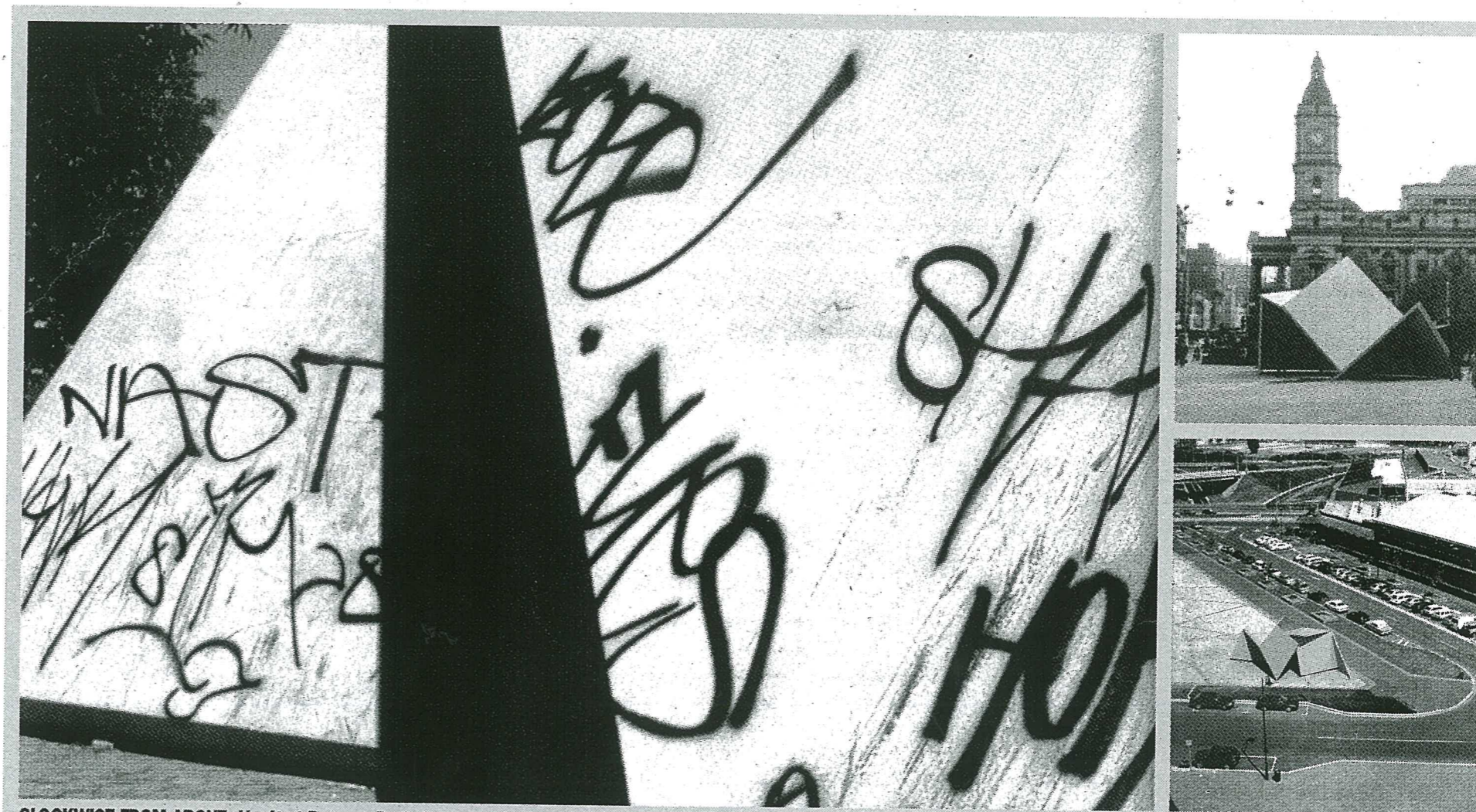
If you didn't know its history, you might think, as you walked down from St Kilda Road on a sunny day, that Ron Robertson-Swann's sculpture *Vault* had been designed for the corner of Grant and Dodds streets, Southbank.

Its bright yellow looks good against the rusty brown of architects Wood Marsh's neighbouring, bunker-like building, principally occupied by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. Its shape also complements the dramatic planes of the Wood Marsh design.

However, the sand on which it stands is unpleasant to walk on and, more importantly, is unconvincing as a platform in texture and colour. And, at night, while the Wood Marsh building basks in a rosy glow, the sadly unlit *Vault*, which has been there for about 18 months, looks vulnerable. Or is pessimism about the future of this sculpture just the result of reading Geoffrey Wallis's history of it?

Peril in the Square tells how Robertson-Swann's then unnamed work, destined for architects Denton Corker Marshall's (DCM) 1976 redesign of the City Square, became the despised "Yellow Peril" within six weeks of being installed in May 1980. The sculpture was moved to Batman Park in August 1981.

Wallis's well-illustrated, fastidiously footnoted book is



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: *Vault* at Batman Park, its second location; in the City Square, for which it was designed; and now at Southbank, from *Peril in the Square*.

an account of city council politicking, media beat-ups, philistinism and ignorance. It is not ostensibly about the merits of the sculpture, but Wallis is obviously an apologist for it. I doubt if many others think it's a great work of art — except perhaps in comparison with most of the decorative pieces that were commissioned for Swanston Walk in the 1990s. However, *Vault* has always had its supporters.

Wallis quotes a 1980 letter to the sculptor from a woman alert to the simple fact that a sculpture, like any artwork, has to be experienced at first hand and she considered it a beauti-

ful experience "to stand underneath and feel its wonderful presence".

The author drew heavily on media files. While there were many responsible reports, the most crucial aspect of the saga is expressed in a 1995 interview Wallis recorded with Irvin Rockman. The former councillor was of the opinion that "if the media hadn't picked it up, the whole thing would have sat there and that would have been the end of it".

Launching the book at ACCA last Friday, Rockman entertained the small crowd with insights into the ignorance and incompetence evident in

council discussions of the sculpture, which, incidentally, it approved five separate times.

For some, *Vault's* colour was always the problem. Architect Peter Corrigan was quoted in *The Age* in September 1981 as saying "It dared you like an old blonde girlfriend pouting at you. Blondes have all the fun. It's as primitive as that."

Wallis relieves the detailed chronology of events with anecdotes set outside the main text. One such has it that Broken Hill artist Pro Hart offered to swap a William Dobell or a Russell Drysdale for his collection for the sculpture. Now there was a

missed opportunity.

For those nostalgic about the heady days of community activism, chapters seven and eight tell of work bans on removing the sculpture and Norm Gallagher, the Builders Labourers Federation "supremo", entering what was perceived as a battle of the underdogs — Robertson-Swann and the sculpture — against powerful civic authorities.

Peril in the Square is a useful and readable study. It's ironic that the vilified sculpture has outlasted DCM's City Square for which it was intended.