

All within a hop, skip and dance

A plan to upgrade an arts precinct in Melbourne will be a civic planning coup if pulled off, writes **Corrie Perkin**

PLANS are under way for Australia's most ambitious cultural project. It involves at least 10 national and state-run arts organisations, hundreds of artists and billions of dollars of infrastructure and assets. A \$5 million blueprint for the Southbank Cultural Precinct Redevelopment in Melbourne is being prepared and already the Victorian Government and arts bureaucrats are debating its virtues.

If the concept is accepted, it will be a civic planning coup that links together cultural centres south of the Yarra River through a series of walkways, gardens, buildings, performance spaces and plazas.

A government document titled Putting Melbourne Centre Stage says the plan is to develop "a precinct that connects the arts to people... that will enrich the entire community and confirm Melbourne's place among the world's great cities."

"Yes, we already have many outstanding arts facilities," the document continues. "But some are becoming dated while others are fragmented and disconnected from the people. For Melbourne to maintain and build on its cultural reputation, urgent action is needed."

Carrillo Gantner, president of the Victorian Arts Centre Trust and a keen supporter of the proposal, describes it as "a visionary plan (that) will define Melbourne's cultural heart for the next 50 years".

The Southbank project needs state government money. Some strategic lobbying is under way in Canberra to secure federal funding and it is believed Victorian Liberal senators, including former arts minister Rod Kemp, are urging their parliamentary colleagues to consider the project's upsides, in particular its cultural and tourism potential.

If both governments commit, the redevelopment could be completed within five to seven years.

The proposed Melbourne redevelopment addresses a problem facing many of the world's arts centres that are 20-plus years old: ageing buildings.

The St Kilda Road Arts Centre and Concert Hall were conceived in the late 1950s and incorporated into a 1960 masterplan by architect Roy Grounds, who also designed the National Gallery of Victoria building next door. Just as the Sydney Opera House took 16 years to emerge on the harbour skyline, Melbourne's concert hall (now Hamer Hall) and theatre buildings evolved over more than 20 years, from planning stage to construction (which started in 1973), then completion (Hamer Hall in 1982 and the theatre's building two years later).

Now in its third decade, the arts centre is in urgent need of an upgrade.

General wear and tear, changing audience demands, and sophisticated advances in public building design and front and back-of-house technology are reminders of how quickly these buildings can date.

The surrounding Southbank environs have also changed dramatically and this, too, must

be addressed. Forty years ago the Yarra River's south side was a place for factories and car yards. In 1992, the Southgate shopping and restaurant precinct opened. High-rise apartments and office blocks soon followed and the area became a hive of seven-day-a-week pedestrian traffic.

In recent years, also, the arts centre, Hamer Hall and the NGV have been joined by other organisations and buildings: the Australian Ballet's headquarters, the ABC (also home of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra) and the Iwaki orchestral auditorium, Arts Victoria, the Malthouse Theatre, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, the Recital Centre and Melbourne Theatre Company theatre (due for completion in 2009), the Victorian College of the Arts, the Australian Ballet School, Chunky Move dance company and the Performing Arts Museum are within 500m of one another.

This burgeoning cultural mini-city has flourished at the back door of the arts centre edifice and along Sturt Street. And what an unattractive back door it is.

"They've never done anything with the back of the arts centre, it has always been a service area with everything directed to St Kilda Road at the front," says Melbourne architect and critic Neil Cleverhan.

"I suppose Roy Grounds and others never imagined how the rear of the building might one day develop."

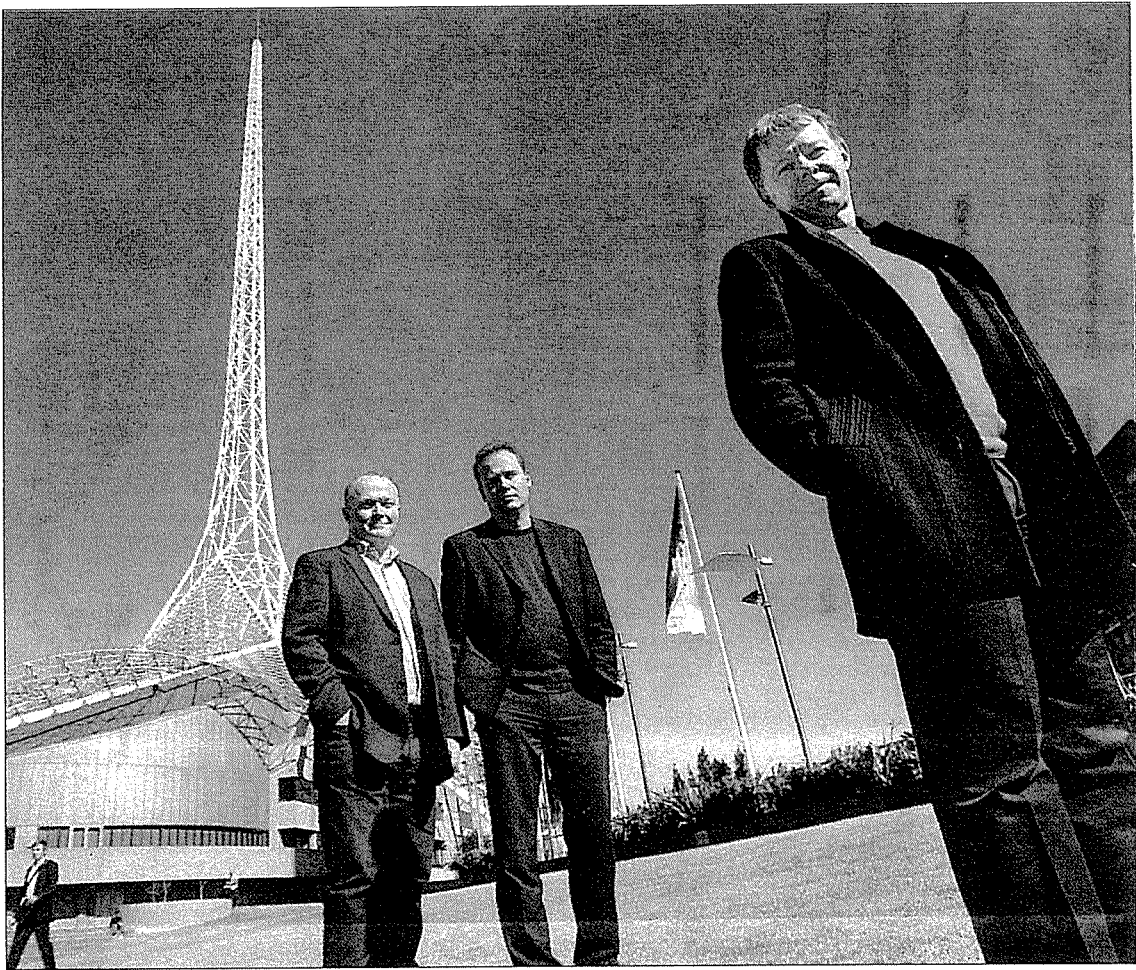
The cultural institutions say the time has come to fix the bleak Sturt Street landscape. People whose offices overlook the area have noted the number of visitors who, having parked their car in the Australian Ballet building, become lost in their search for the theatre across the road.

Regular arts goers also often bemoan the fact that the safest route from the Malthouse Theatre-ACCA-VCA area to the Southbank restaurants is through the bowels of the arts centre and along St Kilda Road.

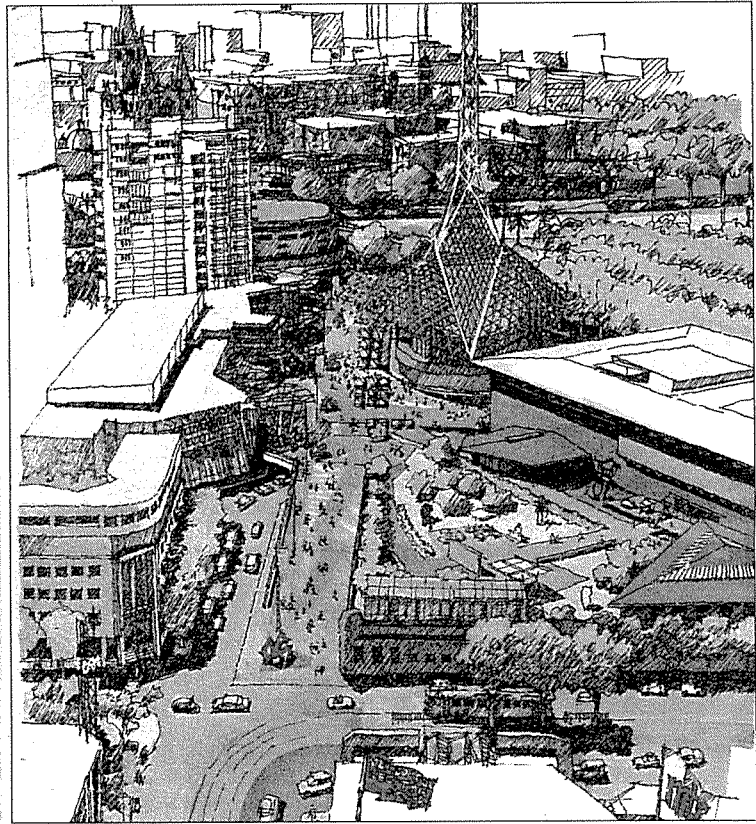
Having acknowledged that the arts centre needs an upgrade (a figure of \$180 million has been discussed), the state Government may decide to include it in a total cohesive precinct redevelopment. It would be a brilliant outcome for the area, but several planning obstacles still need to be overcome.

First, pedestrians need a clear and safe route that avoids the heavy City Road traffic between the arts precinct and the Southgate complex. This could be solved with a new, purpose-built arts building on the old YMCA site, between City Road and the back of the Australian Ballet building. The state Government owns the site and for years has discussed possible tenants such as the orchestra, or an expanded ballet centre, and how best to blend the site with the arts centre to its east.

A connected overpass-type construction above City Road would immediately solve the pedestrian issue. Another problem is the height difference between Sturt Street and St Kilda Road. The likely and most affordable solution is to create a wide promenade ramp that extends from Hamer Hall, down the rear of the theatres building and parallel with the



Working on first stage: Richard Francis-Jones, right, with partners Geoff Crocker, left, and Jeff Morehen of FJMT Architects Picture: Andrew Henshaw



Building on Melbourne's cultural reputation: Artist's impression of the planned precinct

Australian Ballet building. The ramp would then sweep into Stuart Street on the west side of the NGV garden wall.

The plan also suggests opening up the NGV sculpture garden at the rear of the gallery, as well as creating new spaces where visitors can watch ballet dancers and musicians rehearse through windows.

Richard Francis-Jones of FJMT Architects, which is working on the first stage of the proposal, says one of the positives about the cultural redevelopment is that most of the key buildings are already there.

"This was a truly remarkable series of arts buildings concentrated on the south of the river which Roy Grounds realised. It was quite

'A visionary plan (that) will define Melbourne's cultural heart for the next 50 years'

Carrillo Gantner, Victorian Arts Centre Trust president

visionary for Victoria and for the nation," Francis-Jones says. "But 50 years is a long time, and the needs and requirements for an arts centre change enormously, not only in the diversity of what the city demands but technically what's required."

"These sorts of facilities need to be looked at again because they represent a great investment on behalf of the city. The arts centre in particular needs a sense of revitalisation to realise its value as a cultural asset to the city."

Arts Centre chief executive Tim Jacobs says a town planning response to Melbourne's blossoming Southbank is greatly needed.

More people would be attracted to the area, particularly on weekends, he argues, and therefore their exposure to the arts would be increased.

"A project like this allows you to reinvent existing facilities, but it could also be that you build a broader, more diverse audience with what you're able to do," he says. "Melbourne has this unique potential to develop a critical mass between the cultural institutions and the way the public accesses them."

"The Arts Centre, the ABC, the Malthouse, the NGV and all the others, if you could conceive them as an integrated facility or area, you would have such potential to capture energy and creativity."

The state Government's \$5 million investment in moving the project from a set of clever ideas to a thoughtful business plan and architects' drawings will require determination on the part of some politicians and arts bureaucrats.

"None of these projects get up just because someone like me thinks it's time," Jacobs says. "In the end, the case has got to be rigorous and compelling."