

Premier's state-of-the-arts plans

Ted Baillieu won't discuss funding but has thought a lot about arts activities and precincts, writes Robin Usher.

TED Baillieu is a busy man. His twin responsibilities as Premier and Arts Minister mean it has taken more than three months for him to have this interview focused on the arts.

But there is no doubting his commitment and at the end of a 40-minute meeting, he volunteers to take on an extra task of finding ways for the public to have access to the fine paintings on loan from the National Gallery of Victoria that hang in government offices and in Parliament House corridors.

In a tour of his Treasury Place nerve centre, he points to works by John Brack and Arthur Boyd facing each other in a rarely used annexe, and says works by the same artists hang in a toilet corridor in Parliament House.

"I know these are secure places but it would be good if the paintings could go on show in public buildings where people could see them," he says.

Baillieu continues a Liberal Party tradition in sharing the responsibilities of premier with those of arts minister, following Rupert Hamer and Jeff Kennett, a much-applauded partnership.

His two predecessors were builders. Hamer commissioned the construction of the Arts Centre and Kennett oversaw \$1 billion spent on arts construction, including the Melbourne Museum, renovations at the National Gallery of Victoria and the State Library, and the construction of the NGV's Australian wing at Federation Square.

If anything, Baillieu comes to office with a stronger arts commitment than his prede-



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PICTURE: RODGER CUMMINS

cessors after nearly a decade on the Comedy Festival board.

He was also an arts practitioner during his days as an architecture student at Melbourne University in the early 1970s, when he performed twice in the Architects Revue with such comic tyros as Rod Quantock and Mary Kenneally.

"They tease me that we are all professional comics, only I am operating in a different field," he says. "They were fantastic times. The rules were there could be no profanity and no smut, which meant you had to be funny."

Baillieu will not discuss funding issues because of budget considerations but he reaffirms his commitment to the Comedy Festival.

"It does an amazing job in

getting bums on seats and is widely appreciated," he says.

He acknowledges the government's arts funding is channelled through institutions but he wants them to have "a perpetual edginess".

"I want to make sure they remain fresh and interested in engaging with younger people and are constantly challenging themselves," he says.

Baillieu confirms his election promise of \$6 million a year to the Victorian College of the Arts, although talks with its parent body, Melbourne University, have "a way to go" before the funding can be commissioned.

"It is not there to displace any other income," he says, meaning that it cannot be used to pay university rent. But he is

reassured the university has gone a long way to recognising the VCA's independence. "It is a key commitment to the arts and has a huge role to play, particularly in the [Southbank] precinct."

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He concedes that little has happened in the precinct despite the previous government's preparation of a master plan over the past five years concentrated on developing Sturt Street as a pedestrian plaza linking the NGV, the ABC, the Melbourne Symphony, Melbourne Recital Centre, the VCA, Australian Centre for Contem-

porary Art and Malthouse and Melbourne theatre companies.

That seemed dependant on federal funding but Baillieu wants Sturt Street to be developed "organically", with the opening of cafes and after-dark life.

"I don't think Sturt Street itself can be the driver. The front door is St Kilda Road with the crowds and the public transport, so I think the precinct's development depends on the companies it incorporates."

While he says the Arts Centre development will proceed in its own right after the current \$128.5 million renovation of Hamer Hall, he says the "brutal" corner with Southbank Boulevard occupied by the ABC, MRC and the

NGV's car park needs to be softened and broken down.

His model is the transformation of RMIT from "a campus full of silos" to "a living breathing city campus with a sense of place".

He says the government's role will be to offer guidance so the precinct's transformation is not imposed from above. "It is architecturally sensitive and requires careful thinking with the right people to do it," he says.

Baillieu says he is "attracted" to the expansion of the NGV to include Aboriginal and Asian galleries but thinks the extension of the Federation Square platform is an expensive option. "It requires a long-term vision that others can get behind."

He remains committed to the government's election promise of introducing a dusk-to-dawn Nuits Blanche (white nights) festival, probably in 2012, although the right time has to be selected in the crowded events calendar.

The fine weather in autumn meant it was unlikely to find a date there, and he says suggestions the Melbourne International Arts Festival should move to March are impractical.

Other commitments include support for a Bollywood film festival independent of the Melbourne International Film Festival and the restoration of the Melbourne City Museum in the Old Treasury Building in Spring Street.

"It was a delicate little gem that was a gateway for curators," he says. "I didn't mind the signage on the steps."

While he recognised the financial difficulties facing Orchestra Victoria, he refused to discuss possible solutions.

He says the government is also keen to set aside money in a regional transformation fund that would allow country towns to collaborate with artists to transform existing places.