

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

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Marvellous Melbourne

Part of my role at The Age is to write about - and comment on - the changes that are occurring in the city that my organisation serves. Invariably, they involve issues of heritage, planning and development - the three often colliding in passionate debates. Melbournians rightly have a sense of ownership about their city, and have opinions about the way it is developing, both for the better and the worse. Indeed, at the very heart of this is the subject of Marvellous Melbourne - and whether the jewel city of the south still deserves that description.

A journalist, I suppose, can reflect the vox populi. So in that spirit, let me begin with a very important Melbourne icon: Kylie Ann Minogue, or as she is known to the millions who adore her, simply Kylie. But what does Kylie have to do with Marvellous Melbourne? Plenty. She is one of the many great talents who have performed live at the Palace Theatre at the top of Melbourne's Bourke Street. The critics raved about her performance in 2012, organised at two weeks' notice and sold out within 15 minutes. An extra show was scheduled.

She was part of a line up that, over the years, has made the Palace a wonderful music venue, both for live acts and as a nightclub. Sadly, the Palace now sits in darkness as an application is considered to erect a new luxury hotel and apartments on the site. I'd argue that the battle over the Palace Theatre goes to the very heart of whether Melbourne can maintain its status as Marvellous Melbourne.

The site has been a theatre or entertainment venue since the gold-rush days of the 1850s. It has been home to a diverse range of activities: boxing and wrestling, cinema, a nightclub, and a live music venue. From the 1850s to the early 20th century, the site at 20-30 Bourke Street was occupied by the Excelsior Hotel - there was a strong connection between pubs and theatres, and the Excelsior had a venue called the Queen's Hall. The building was destroyed by fire in 1911 and reopened in 1912 in what would become the Palace.

Four years later, the interiors were re-designed by cinema and theatre architect Henry White, featuring elaborate and extensive plaster decoration. There have been regular changes, including the addition of the Moderne facade in the 1950s. It has been in a constant state of change, both architecturally, and in terms of use.

The Palace sits in the Bourke Hill precinct, an area that is a favourite part of Melbourne for me. Bourke Street rises to the top of a hill, where the sandstone Victorian Parliament building with its classical facade on Spring Street sits. One of the reasons this precinct has such presence is the vista up Bourke Street to the Parliament. Low rise buildings ensure that the perspective works, that the eye is drawn to the top of the hill.

When I wrote about this last year, I spent some time watching how people reacted to the space. The striking image was watching a tourist with a camera in middle of the road, playing chicken with the number 96 tram as he ventured to get the best shot. A view to die for, yes, but not literally.

I was there because of a remarkable debate that was gripping the city. A developer had proposed demolishing the Palace and building a five-star hotel. Originally, it was going to be 30 storeys, but was reduced by about a third to 72 metres high. The impact would have been devastating for the area - a giant imposing itself on a low-rise, largely Victorian-era streetscape. The response was telling - a mobilisation of some of the most powerful individuals in Victoria, and what can best be described as a revolt by the everyman and woman.

First, there was the intervention of the Victorian Parliament, protesting to Planning Minister Matthew Guy "in the strongest possible terms" against the proposal. A powerful grassroots campaign also emerged from the Save the Palace group, using social media to activate the support of all of those who have loved and supported the Palace, not just the building, but its life as a live music venue and nightclub.

Mr Guy heard and shared the concern. Even before decisions were announced, Mr Guy declared the "developer is dreaming" if he thought it would be approved in the form submitted. "It's too tall, in the wrong location." In June of 2014, Mr Guy announced mandatory height limits for the Bourke Hill precinct. The move converts discretionary

height limits of 15 metres, 23 metres and 60 metres into mandatory limits.

New plans for the Palace site have been resubmitted, in line with the new height restrictions, which means that at the time of this conference, it is being considered by the Melbourne City Council. Yet it would mean the demolition of the Palace. Even at a lower height, I continue to have serious concerns about the end of the Palace, for I would argue that it would represent a significant loss to the heritage of Melbourne and Victoria.

The building has been changed and modified over its life but to me, that points to an essential strength: a relevance to the community of which it is a part; not a museum piece, but a venue that has engaged a cross-section of Melbourne's society throughout its existence.