

Birth of a Cultural Centre

In 1942 the Victorian Government began looking at the effect World War II was having on the provision of public buildings.

A post-war reconstruction committee was set up in that year to look into future facilities for the Public Library, National Gallery and Museum - then all linked under one governing body and housed at the top end of Swanston and La Trobe Streets in Melbourne's central business district.

The trustees of the National Gallery regarded this as an opportunity to gain a new building and independence, a view shared by the architects appointed by Then Premier, Sir Albert Dunstan.

In 1943 they recommended a separate gallery and an auditorium to hold 1000 people be built on the Wirth's Park site in St Kilda Road. The estimated cost of this venture was 2 million pounds.

Melbourne's music lovers applauded the auditorium suggestion, and composer Dr Margaret Sutherland initiated a public meeting of music, drama and ballet societies which led to the formation of the Combined Arts Centre Movement.

The resolution of this group's first meeting was: "That this meeting of citizens representing the cultural arts of music, drama and ballet present to Parliament a petition asking that the erection of a suitable building for the aforementioned arts form part of the immediate post-war development scheme."

Signed by 40,000 people, this petition was presented to the Victorian government. In February 1944 State Cabinet decided the Wirth's site would be reserved for public purposes. By October of that year the site committee recommended "a new Gallery, with a small chamber for music, and the subsequent construction of a State auditorium with 1000 seats for non-commercial presentation of high-class drama and other cultural purposes."

Securing the site was another matter. Although the land belonged to the Crown, it was subject to various leases. The coalition Liberal and Country Party government was defeated on 19 September 1945, the day it introduced the Melbourne South Land Act to reserve the site for cultural purposes. The Act was passed the following year by the Labor government under John Cain Senior.

Despite the passing of the Act, the years between 1945 and 1955 were politically turbulent, with 12 governments in 10 years, and the Act was not proclaimed. During this time the land came under threat from commercial interests, but was saved by the intervention of Parliament and the press.

In March 1955 the Town and Country Planning Association petitioned the government, with the Association's director and president continuing an active involvement with the Centre. The Association's Director, Mr R A Gardener, played an ongoing role in organising public support for the project as did its President Mr Kenneth Myer, who later became Chair of the Committee responsible for building the Centre. Mr Myer retired from the position of Trust Chairman after an involvement with the performing arts spanning over 40 years.

In June 1955 the new premier, Henry Bolte, kept his election promise of proclaiming the Act and established a committee to plan and build a National Art Gallery and Cultural Centre.

In December 1959 the noted architect Roy Grounds was appointed to the project. In 1960, together with Mr Eric Wesbrook, he made a three month, 52-city tour of North America and Europe, looking at more than 100 galleries, museums, theatres, Concert Halls and libraries.

His master plan was presented and approved in December 1960, and the project was planned in two stages - first the gallery and then the performing arts centre and spire.

The National Gallery was planned and built in seven years, without a major hitch, at the cost of \$14 million. \$1.5 million of this came from a public appeal organised by a committee chaired by Mr R D Malcolmson. The National Gallery of Victoria opened on 20 August 1968.

The second stage proved slightly more difficult. The original plan was to put Theatres and Hamer Hall underground in one building, topped by a copper-sheathed spire, however it soon became evident the cost would be prohibitive.

While the second stage was linked to the first, it didn't have the same firm basalt rock foundation. Once part of Port Phillip Bay, the site had been filled with gravel aquifer Coode Island silt, and layers of salamander filling over the past century. The Building Committee decided to build Hamer Hall on a separate site and to raise the planned Theatres halfway out of the ground.

This decision, together with the ongoing geographic difficulties of the site, added three years to the project. Eventually construction began in 1973 and 1200 steel piles were driven into the bed-rock 25m below, upon which was poured a giant concrete trough. A protective electric current, similar to that used on oil rigs, was built into the steel piles, thus preventing corrosion. The concrete was also protected by a 2mm thick rubber compound, ensuring a long life for the structure. The foundations for Theatres building had finally been laid The building opened in October 1984.

Construction of Hamer Hall, built on a small site known as Snowden gardens, and donated to the State government in 1974, was much easier. Hamer Hall opened in 1982 as the Melbourne Concert Hall.