

## **MMHN Opportunity 6**

### **Southbank Maritime Heritage Precinct**

MMHN Special Advisory Groups: Tourism and Infrastructure  
MMHN Board members SAG leads: Martin Dixon and David Goodwin

Urban planning decisions dictating the shaping of the southern river bank, and built form construction in twentieth century have resulted in the complete disregard of the important maritime heritage of this, the southern stretch of the Yarra.

Consequently, the historical maritime heritage narrative of the south bank is ‘interrupted’. Yet it nonetheless exists and MMHN is committed to preserving and celebrating both the evidence which remains and, although it had disappeared, acknowledging and informing the community about this rich, lost heritage. Regrettably, successive state governments and City of Melbourne councillors have perceived the southern bank of the Yarra as a ‘green field’ site, ripe for redevelopment as part of an urban renewal program for vacant land, devoid of history. This was certainly not the case.

#### **Trade and Industry**

Downstream from Princes Bridge, burgeoning maritime trade led to the construction of extensive infrastructure along the southern banks of the Yarra – wharves, jetties and warehouses, infrastructure that was integral to maritime trade which generated Melbourne’s prosperity prior to the construction of Victoria Harbour. Inland, and set back from the waterfront, in South Melbourne, Port Melbourne and Fishermen’s Bend, distribution and processing facilities allied to the maritime trade were constructed and this led to a growth of associated industries.

#### **Transport and Recreation**

Around the many iterations of the Princes Bridge, a plethora of jetties from where punts and ferries operated to and from the CBD, transporting people and goods, and provided a launching place for many recreational pastimes from either side of the bridge. For example, upstream from the bridge, rowing sports clubs thrived. In July 1871 the ‘Early Closing Association Rowing Club’ was established and has been continuously active from premises beside the Yarra River for over 140 years. The name arose from a social movement advocating early closing of shops at 2pm on Saturday to allow workers leisure time. In August 1873 the name ‘Yarra Yarra Rowing Club’ was chosen specifically as an historical link to Aboriginal variants of the word ‘Yarra’ to indicate a flowing or rippling character.

Downstream from Princes Bridge, in 1877, Cooper and Bailey’s Great American International Circus, one of the first travelling circuses, pitched a Big Top tent on the site. A permanent circus home, Olympia, was built in 1901 by the Fitzgerald Brothers’ Circus, then Australia’s

biggest circus. In 1907, Wirth Brothers' Circus took over the entire site and remained there for the next 50 years until its buildings were destroyed by fire in 1953. During World War I; some of the buildings were used as repatriation homes for soldiers and nurses.

In December 1959, Roy Grounds, a noted architect, was appointed to design the National Gallery Centre and Hamer Hall, on or near this south bank river site, which was in use as a car park. The design is considered architecturally arresting and is irrefutably a key cultural asset for Melbourne; but it did not reference the river in any meaningful way. On the contrary, it effectively drew attention away from the river. However, the river could not be ignored. Over eons the shifting meandering river course, the floods and thousands of years of silt deposits made construction technically challenging and costly.

Although several older industrial buildings a set at a distance from the riverside were identified for retention, wharf side infrastructure was deemed to be without value. In the 1990s Southbank Promenade, Southgate Restaurant and Shopping Precinct, and Crown Casino, were constructed but certainly not in a manner acknowledging the maritime heritage of the river, nor its heritage value as a public asset. Looking to the river, the visual impression is that of an encased stone channel and not the site of what was once a thriving river port.

Further downstream, in 2004 a new Convention Centre was commenced – a collaboration project between the state government and the City of Melbourne. The Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC) opened in 2009 and was expanded later by a further 25%, forming an immense and successful public asset overlooking a visually important bend on the river immediately opposite the CBD.

Significantly, a large grassed open space remains between the river and the MCEC and the river. MMHN views this as an important opportunity to acknowledge Melbourne's maritime heritage.

Access to the river from the south bank is difficult. The pathways are uneven and built up to an extent that the natural riparian zone has been eliminated.

### **Southbank Maritime Precinct**

MMHN argues that the value of this CBD open space is far from optimised, and this can be ameliorated in the short and longer term. With minimal investment, this lacklustre space can be re-configured to great advantage.

#### **Short term**

- Identify and refresh the shabby collection of maritime assets, scattered in an ad hoc manner at this location. e.g. unidentified anchors, buoys, signals mast, etc.
- Re-fresh and respect the Merchant Seamen's Flag Pole flag pole and memorial.
- Celebrate and inform the heritage significance of the only surviving heritage-listed Dry Dock, Wet Dock and Pump House Engine in Victoria.

#### **In the longer term**

Relocate the vessel *Polly Woodside* onto to a barge berthed alongside the river to be accessed from the open space. Currently the vessel is located in the middle of an adult hospitality precinct and its former museum premises are leased to a hospitality group.

Commission a maritime heritage walk from the Rowing Precinct through Southbank to the Bolte West Precinct and Fishermen's Bend identifying through a narrative and providing signage to existing and lost maritime heritage assets.

## Linking North and South Bank

MMHN argues that recognition of the significance of the Yarra River – both banks and associated infrastructure – has been lost. They are all elements of the maritime heritage of Melbourne, and should be celebrated.

Without question, the maritime heritage of the river exists but is not acknowledged and adequately explained to the community. Poor piecemeal urban planning decisions and a persistent failure to capture the cultural and economic value of Melbourne's maritime heritage can be addressed.

The 2009 Pedestrian Seafarers Pedestrian Bridge is the unifying link, enabling the community to understand the past, crossing the river from the enriched Southbank Maritime Heritage Precinct to the north bank Maritime Heritage Precinct (i.e. Mission to Seafarers, North Wharf, Seafarers Rest Park, Greenline Trail, ANARE Monument, Heritage listed No 5 Goods Shed and Crane)

The north and south banks of the Yarra River are geographically linked and should be celebrated and developed as a whole.