

MMHN Opportunity 3 Victoria Harbour

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Recognition and activation of an undeveloped public asset

Victoria Harbour, formerly Victoria Port, is world-renowned as a nineteenth-century civil engineering ‘marvel’ largely hand excavated – yet its remarkable genesis and evolution story is largely unknown. The plethora of responsible authorities has persistently, probably inadvertently, impeded optimum commercial activation.

Its potential lies dormant. Its wharves and related rail infrastructure which enabled Victoria’s prosperity remain in decline neglected, degraded and in poor condition. Agencies responsible for the maintenance of these public assets have indicated little understanding or interest in the care of maritime infrastructure. Priorities are elsewhere and the City of Melbourne has been sidelined, denied control of what is actually an urban economic asset.

Maintenance and activation of Victoria Harbour requires appropriate levels of maintenance funding as well as a grasp of the potential of such a space. International models of activation are plentiful. Over decades funding dedicated to maintenance in Victoria Harbour has dwindled, possibly as a consequence of bureaucratic ignorance in relation to optimizing the economic value of this asset in Melbourne’s CBD. A similar ignorance accounts for the prohibitively low clearance beneath bridges, the most absurd example being the Bolte Bridge, which not only prevents tall ships from entering Victoria Harbour, but was constructed without freight rail capacity.

In essence, Victoria Harbor should be recognized as a versatile aquatic Amphitheatre adjacent to the CBD – well served by public transport and to a lesser extent, by ferries. The absence of civic aspiration to optimize the value of Victoria Harbour may account for the absence of minimal ferry services even though Melbourne has more navigable waterways than Sydney.

MMHN Vision

The MMHN vision for Victoria Harbour is that it be properly acknowledged as a civic asset beyond merely the ‘visual’ outlook enhancing the real-estate value of the multiple residential and corporate towers around the perimeter. Victoria Harbour is a significant maritime heritage site which is poorly managed, irrefutably not only an undeveloped public economic asset, but also a site with immense undeveloped a civic possibilities.

The degradation and the opportunity

Regrettably the extraordinary harbor, originally designed and constructed with imagination and skill, has been completely ignored by subsequent state governments, which have been ignorant of its maritime heritage significance.

Following the closure of the harbour for freight, a series of state agencies were tasked with 'developing' the large brown-field site within the CBD. Each displayed absolutely no consideration whatsoever for the economic value in maritime heritage.

Immensely valuable infrastructure was demolished and discarded, Heritage logistical infrastructure was ripped-up. Elsewhere in the world, industrial heritage sites have been restored in acknowledgement of their immense tourism value. Not so Melbourne.

Development rights to the site were allocated to a series of developers with no consideration given to the integrity and aesthetic value of this heritage site. Complementary architecture has not been specified. This peculiar 'amnesia' in relation to Victoria Harbour by the state government continues. Once containerization emerged in maritime logistics, Victoria Harbour was thought to be 'obsolete' - presumably worthless. Elsewhere in the world such 'obsolete' infrastructure is valued – e.g. canals, seawalls, windmills etc. In Melbourne, this unique 'public asset' with unique maritime infrastructure was reduced to an aquatic backdrop to residential and corporate tower constructions.

From a cutting-edge maritime powerhouse driving the prosperity of Melbourne and regional Victoria, today's Victoria Harbour is in danger of becoming merely a gigantic pond without purpose.

Reimagining Victoria Harbour

MMHN is committed to Victoria Harbour being 're-imagined' as Melbourne's aquatic 'playground', a precinct offering continuous and diverse free or ticketed attractions. Services might include:

- Free programs of light/laser shows projected across the harbour skies.
- Free programs of water projections from the water at intervals.
- *Son-et-Lumiere* program based at the heritage listed Harbour Masters Tower at the tip of Collins Wharf enclosing the Victoria Harbour creatively illuminated and, in the small park nearby, present the 'stories', past and present, of Victoria Harbour, the Blue Lake and the Bolte Bridge.
- Free concerts using a pontoon stage in the Amphitheatre Bridge
- Installations of shipping containers - emblematic of Docklands - which double as pop-up exhibition sites and large public screens to project of maritime images.
- The Heritage Fleet permanently berthed in Victoria Harbour, seaworthy and fully operational
- A series of visiting vessels berthed in Victoria Harbour, routinely illuminated to create a spectacle
- A large pontoon moored on the bay side of the Bolte Bridge to enable visiting 'tall ships' to berth in close proximity to the CBD with a dedicated ferry service from the pontoon to the City of Melbourne Marina Lounge at New Quay.
- Ferries/Waterways Hub adjacent to Central Pier/Victoria Harbour as a terminus as part of the Public Transport Ferry Network serving the Yarra River upstream and down extending as far as Burnley and both banks of the Maribyrnong River;
- Ferries incorporated into the Myki system offering the public an attractive waterways option to congested rail, road and tram.

- The benefits of shared ticketing, cross promotion etc. are captured in relation to ferry links, tourist maps and public transport options.
- Ferry stations at Bolte West Precinct), Southbank, Fisherman’s Bend Williamstown, the Yarra Estuary, into Port Phillip Bay - to Station/Princes Pier and St. Kilda Pier and the Mornington Peninsula, across to Portarlington, Queenscliff and Geelong.
- A Waterways Tourism Hub on Harbour Esplanade to support commercial tourism ventures and taxis in the rivers, Victoria Harbour, the Bay, and beyond. a variety of programs serving many purposes, including private and corporate functions, education, and entertainment, such as an interpretive cruise for the Port of Melbourne along similar lines to *Five Short Blasts Melbourne 2013 Prague 2015*: <https://vimeo.com/150977387>. Even a foreign company recognizes the tourism value of cruising Melbourne’s waterways!
- Public access to a variety of vessel types (punts, yachts, water taxis) and amphibious permanent public floating open air swimming pool alongside Ron Barassi Senior Oval.
- Public viewing platforms at Bolte West Precinct opposite Victoria Harbour accessed via Lorimer Street, Fisherman’s Bend, built with the cooperation of the Port of Melbourne, enabling the public to view the river maritime traffic.
- Local and state Government policy re-focus mandates that all major events in Melbourne includes a waterways element – Melbourne Cup, Formula 1 Grand Prix, AFL Grand Final, Australian Tennis Open, Moomba, the Show.
- Support for the boating industry – e.g. Victoria Annual Boat Show.
- Engagement by young audience – Children’s Maritime Festival.
- Australian Maritime College collaboration to promote/host submarine or alternate propulsion competition for school children.
- Victoria Harbour as a site to engage in projects involving Citizen Science.
- Responsible authorities (e.g. Parks Victoria) and stakeholder groups (e.g. Yarra River Keepers) collaborate to proactively engage the public in relation to waterborne litter and pollution.
- A variety of annual events specifically to enliven the waterways including Rowing Regattas, Dragon Boat Races, Inflatables, and innovative propulsion races, Boat Shows, competitive ‘artistic Floats’.
- Submerged freight railway tube Bridge the Bay side of the Bolte Bridge on the seabed controlled by AI linking the Port Fisherman’s Bend docks with the freight distribution network at Footscray or Truganina, (Such AI controlled services operate successfully in a sealed tubes in Europe),

Brief history

Victoria Harbour is a world-renowned nineteenth-century civil engineering ‘marvel’ largely hand excavated, a unique and unusual element of City of Melbourne maritime trade history.

Victoria Harbour is an artificially constructed ‘basin’ excavated by hand and with steam shovels to greatly extend the capacity of the port. The Yarra River and Estuary entrance were prone to silting and were shallow. Laden vessels had to be towed upstream to the city. Passengers and goods alighting at Williamstown had to negotiate expensive carriage by water across to the city. As the City of Melbourne evolved, so too did the propensity for, and the technical capacity to, alter the riverbed to suit trade purposes. Private companies vied to sort out this logistical mess and various proposals to re-shape the course and depth of the riverbed and the swampy area to the west of the river mouth.

Finally, the government stepped in and established an agency, Victorian Harbour Trust, to sort out the solution to the mess deemed to be impeding the economic development of the city. Many plans again merged and finally Coode and Brady came up with a clever plan for maritime infrastructure initially known as Victoria Port – called this because it was Melbourne’s Port. It had excellent associated rail infrastructure for providing coal to drive steam ships and to distribute goods as required. This extensive man-made harbor again proved to be inadequate to needs. Central Pier was installed to significantly increase the capacity of Victoria Port (Victoria Harbour).

Infrastructure - slipways, docks, piers and other infrastructure assets

Remaining examples of maritime legacy infrastructure include warehouses, good sheds, cranes, wharves, piers, bollards, dry-dock machinery, etc. on the Yarra River, estuary, Victoria harbor and Port Phillip Bay. The State Government has committed (Minister for Ports 2018) to adequately maintain the slipway at Dudley Street so that it remains accessible to larger yachts and other ships.

Areas within Victoria Harbour

- **Collins Wharf**

Lendlease Developers have development rights over Collins Wharf. Lendlease plan to restore the heritage listed Harbour Port Control Tower and has committed to retain the redundant dock rail lines extending along Collins Wharf. It has already restored the Australian Wharf area and installed informational signage on its heritage significance. Development Victoria retains responsibility for maintaining the wharf structure and unexpectedly – commenced some sort of remedial work to maintain the wharf facing into Victoria Harbour. Its is shrouded in secrecy and, given the arguably unwarranted closure of Central Pier in 2020 the fear of yet more neglected heritage assets is cause for concern.

- **Harbour Esplanade**

In August 2021 MMHN notes that plans are underway to replace the original ‘temporary’ ferry terminal on Harbour Esplanade. Planning control for this structure lies with the City of Melbourne. MMHN is concerned that CoM and Development Victoria will once again fail to ensure that architectural integrity will be observed around this heritage site. Given that Central Pier is scheduled for re-development, the replacement ferry terminal should rightly complement this structure.

This new structure will be critical to properly enabling the expansion of commercial ferry, water taxi and punt services from Victoria Harbour. Ferry service initiatives around Victoria Harbour, the Yarra and beyond (Bellarine – Sorrento) are increasing and patronage will continue to increase as the urban population density of Melbourne and road congestion increases. Promotion of new ferry or water taxi destinations beyond the CBD around Greater Melbourne with a focus on maritime heritage may appeal to tourists arriving at Station Pier. More ferries and shared ticketing would connect dispersed maritime heritage precincts and assets and would also encourage patronage at various premises. Many cities use this connected or shared ticketing model and public transport.

- **New Quay**

MAB Developers have rights to develop this area. The MAB area is largely developed. Regrettably, MAB also have responsibility to make-good the now degraded wharf area facing Victoria Harbour close to the Ron Barassi Snr Oval. Oval.

- **Beneath the Bolte Bridge**

The City of Melbourne has established a green oval space, sporting clubrooms and a playground beneath the bridge. Regrettably, public transport does not reach this area - nor is water transport access because, to date, MAB have not reconstructed the wharves. There are plans to collaborate with Moonie Valley Council to link Moonee Valley Creek trails to *Greenline*

- **Bolte West Precinct**

Although actually outside the Harbour, this precinct is ‘visible’ as a part of the precinct and should rightly be included in any plans to re-activate the Harbour area.